

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



107 096

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

Cocks and Bulls
in Caracas

Books by Olga Briceño
(Published in Spanish)

BOLIVAR CRIOLLO

BOLIVAR LIBERTADOR

BOLIVAR AMERICANO

MIRANDA

SANTA TERESA DE JESÚS

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

INDICE DE MUJER

Olga Briceño

Cocks and Bulls in Caracas

How We Live in Venezuela

Illustrated by
Kay Peterson Parker



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY · BOSTON

The Riverside Press Cambridge

1 9 4 5

COPYRIGHT, 1945, BY OLGA BRICEÑO

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

*To my friends in the United States
my first North American book is dedicated*

Marion Saunders

Ethel Callan

Esther Buermann

and Clodoaldo Barrera

Foreword

WHEN I was a little girl and learning how to draw, I persisted in painting my dolls' noses green. All Mother's scolding and coaxing in the name of common sense met with the same reply:

'Noses may not be green, but green is more dramatic and shows up better.'

In writing this book on Venezuela, I have endeavored above all to avoid painting noses green, even if it is more dramatic and shows up better. This attempt of mine to describe my native country has nothing in common with the films, nor does it picture the nation as a subject for the screen or cheap lithography. Coconut trees, machetes, guitars, grilled windows, revolutions, and other spectacular ingredients all figure in our life, of course, but they are by no means the whole picture. Behind this setting which the tourists see are complex human beings whom the foreigner seldom comes to know and understand, since we 'live inside.' At this tragic moment of history it is almost a moral obligation for people to look each other straight in the eye, and to see other men and countries in their true colors.

This book is the life of a Venezuelan family. The family being the nucleus of a society and society being the nucleus of a country, the reader will certainly know more about Venezuela after he has known the Briceños. It is our life, simple and complex, sad or gay, superficial or dramatic, just the way it has been, without green noses for effect. I hope you like us. . . .

Contents

I	<i>Home</i>	I
II	<i>Angels</i>	7
III	<i>Young Lady, the Convent!</i>	21
IV	<i>Dust and Dances</i>	33
V	<i>Window Girl</i>	42
VI	<i>God, Saints, and Husbands</i>	59
VII	<i>His Majesty Man</i>	68
VIII	<i>A Timeless World</i>	79
IX	<i>Servants White and Black</i>	91
X	<i>Respectability and Hair</i>	102
XI	<i>What Money Is and Isn't</i>	114
XII	<i>Going Places and Doing Things</i>	126
XIII	<i>Cocks and Bulls</i>	138
XIV	<i>Hallacas Without Vitamins</i>	146
XV	<i>To Love, Honor, and Obey</i>	158

Home

A VENEZUELAN HOUSE is an integral part of family life. Four generations of a branch of the Briceño family, for example, have occupied the same ancestral home. A man may say, when showing a visitor his house:

'My great-grandfather built this gunroom back in the days of independence. The library was added by my grandfather. Father built the modern chicken houses; I am responsible for the garage; and the children are putting in a bar and swimming pool.'

Each age to its taste!

Every new generation makes some addition to the ancestral home according to the fashion of the day. In certain houses it is thus a simple matter to trace changing modes and habits by the various renovations and additions.

When a woman shows her house, it is like a sentimental journey.

'In this room,' she will say, 'Lorenzo's father asked papa's sanction for our marriage thirty years ago. Here in this side room Aunt Hortensia died. Alberto was born in this room, and Alvaro and Josefina in that. My first grandchild was born here. There Julio had the whooping-cough. In the gallery by the vine, Lorenzo gave me his first kiss when we were married. Out yonder in the yard my brother Juan and my cousin Antonio came to dreadful blows because one was pro-Gómez and the other hated tyranny.'

In an upper-class house a door, the *portón*, giving on the street is always open during the day. A few yards farther on, through the little vestibule or *zaguán*, is another door, the inside door; this one is always closed. The *portón* is closed at night, at ten or eleven, say, and the man of the house and the grown-up sons are the only ones who possess keys to it.

Now suppose that you have rung the bell or knocked at the inside door. From the depths of the house a voice approaches, asking:

'Who is there?'

If we want the door opened, we must of necessity reply:

'Peaceful folks.'

And if the person who is coming to admit us follows the convention, she will answer with an impersonal:

'It will come. *Ya va*.'

Then, when you leave, the master of the house will tell you:

'Do come back any time you desire. My house is yours.'

This exchange of conversation dates from the days of the Spanish Conquest, when personal encounters, ambushades, and Indian attacks were frequent. Presumably it was the intonation that told what type of person desired admittance. Conquerors and conquered differed in accent.

Originally these preliminaries were very long. Instead of the '*Ya va*' of today, a sonorous voice called, '*Ave María Purísima*.' The reply was, '*Sin pecado original concebida*.' ('Hail the Virgin Mary.' 'Conceived without sin.')

At last the door is opened, and you stand slightly dazzled by the beauty of the scene. Before you is the gallery with its set of willow furniture, its ferns, its cages of canaries, and its many flower pots, and beyond, the intoxication of the sun, the flowers, the blue sky, and the open patio. A bit of sky inside the house is a refinement which we learned from the Spaniards, as they had in their turn from the Moors. A bright and shining sky by day, with a ruddy glow at twilight, and twinkling stars and moonlight when darkness falls.

The patio is a window to beauty and the infinite. The house



roofs are of tiles, red tiles which turn green with age and moisture, excellent shields against the tropic heat. Along their eaves birds build their nests and cats make love in the moonlight.

As deep as the gallery, except for the entrance vestibule cut off from the latter, is the drawing-room with its elaborate furnishings, its statuary, its pictures, and its windows where the young ladies of the house sit.

Around the patio, with doors and windows opening on it, are the dining-room and other quarters. Farther on in back is a second, smaller patio, intended for the servants, a sort of kitchen breathing-space. Opening from this second patio are the servants' rooms, storerooms, and so on, with a central doorway leading to the yard or garden. The yard is headquarters for the laundress, with big trees, henhouses, pigeons, dogs and other domestic animals, and the clotheslines. Frequently the hens run loose and roost in the branches of the trees.

In the center of the yard is a cement platform, smooth and shining as a lake bathed in moonlight. One might think it a miniature skating rink, but no, it is merely an *embostadero*, a place to spread out the well-soaped clothes to whiten in the sun. Any Venezuelan child will agree that there is no spot better for a sunbath. Flat on my back, with eyes half-closed, watching the clear sky and the treetops waving in the breeze, listening to the song of cocks, animals, and laundress, I spent many fine, lazy hours on an *embostadero* when I was a child, and I still like to now that I am grown.

The laundress sings, bending over the white suds of her tub — sings, smokes, and washes. Every Venezuelan servant finds joy in singing at her work, but in fashionable households it is not permitted save in the yard where no one will hear. The laundress in any household, however, spends her whole day washing in the yard, and she always spends the whole day singing.

At night the yard takes on an air of mystery and has a life

all its own. The laundress has departed, the animals are sleeping, the moon discloses the outline of the trees, the crickets and cicadas chirp among the branches, and the *embostadero* is more than ever suggestive of a calm and silent lake — or even an outspread shroud.

Although Venezuelan children spend hours playing in the yard by daylight, few go there after dark or in the moonlight. According to the folks 'out back' — we who occupy the house are the 'folks inside' — the yard at night is frequented by terrors, phantoms, lights, and *entierros*.

Terrors and phantoms are dark supernatural apparitions. Lights, equally eerie, are taken as the strongest evidence that there is an *entierro* in the house. Any owner who sees an unaccountable light perambulating through his yard or anywhere else around his place should be delighted. A progress from light to *entierro* is indicated, and it really may happen. If it does — riches!

An *entierro* is hidden treasure. Most commonly it consists of huge earthen or metal jars full of gold coins, jewelry, articles of gold and silver, precious stones, perhaps also documents which disclose something of the origin of the hoard in the days of our war of independence.

When the colonists who were fighting for Venezuela's freedom from Spain began to prevail, the hostile Spaniards abandoned their houses and their towns and fled the country or took up arms. Often they could not carry all their wealth with them, and bank accounts were unknown. They preferred to leave their most valuable possessions interred in the house wall or in their grounds, in the hope of reclaiming them after a final victory of the royal forces. That victory never came, and most of the royalists never returned; so their treasure remained concealed and ownerless. Almost always when an *entierro* is uncovered, a human skeleton is found with it, and popular imagination has fabricated many legends to account for this. Someone may tell you, for instance, that the skeleton is that of the slave who concealed the treasure; the mas-

ter, not wanting to share the secret, did away with this witness. As the saying is, a closed mouth tells no tales.

The inhabitants of any house both fear and hope to see a supernatural light. Whenever a house-owner wants to sell, but cannot move his property easily, he will tell a prospect in a confidential tone:

'This place must have an *entierro*. There's a big light that flits about the yard at night.'

If a potential buyer does not fall for that, the case is hopeless.

The house where I grew up stood a hundred yards from the Plaza Bolívar, which is the heart of Caracas. We were lulled at quarter-hourly intervals by the soft tones of the cathedral chimes. And there was a drugstore on the corner, very handy for my father, who makes a hobby of buying medicines that he never uses.

The particular charm of the house for Mother was the garden with tropical vines covering all the walls with flowers, red, yellow, and white, like a brilliant perfumed curtain. In the middle stood a typically Venezuelan and very decorative tree, a *chaguaramo*, lifting its branches well above the second story to the sky. There was also a very unattractive fountain with water trickling merrily from a large flat dish which a fat little angel held perfectly balanced on his head.

Half of the garden, covered with wire netting, formed an enormous aviary. In it, almost as in the open country, there lived a hundred birds or more of different kinds which Father had brought back from trips to the interior or had bought in the market. There are innumerable varieties of birds in Venezuela, of every size, color, song, and habit. Even in the heart of Caracas it is a common sight to see any number of wild birds fly down from the roofs and make themselves at home in gardens where they rest among the trees or drink at fountains.

In the yard, domain of our laundress, Presentación, I persisted in keeping a monkey which someone brought me from a hunting trip across the plains. Whatever his romantic story

may have been, he was, when all is said and done, very homely and ill-mannered and bore a striking resemblance to a current Gómez politician, whose name I naturally bestowed upon him.

When you realize that palm trees, flowers, fountains, birds, and monkey were all right there within a hundred yards of the center of the city, it becomes apparent that our Venezuelan houses are a sort of earthly Paradise.

I must confess, however, that none of these bucolic attractions constituted my chief interest in the house. No, what I liked best was its three windows and three balconies on the street. Respectable girls seldom appear at the windows in Caracas, but I liked to occupy one of the second-story balconies. From that vantage-point it was easy to observe the weather and, more important still, the goings and comings of certain young men who might stand guard below as evidence of their devotion.

For Venezuela, our family was small. It consisted of Father, Mother, my brother Héctor, seven years my senior, and myself. In addition, there was my cousin, beautiful Altigracia, who became an orphan very young and grew up with us as my own sister; and, of course, Presentación, the black mammy who had nursed my mother and who in later years had also taken care of Héctor and me and become Mother's right hand as overseer of the current force of servants. Both my brother and I have married. I have now three little Venezuelans to account for: Misty the brunette, and Yarima the blonde, my two embryonic señoritas, and Miguel, my dark two-year-old.

Angels

MY HOME, with all its birds and flowers and trees, once was filled with gloom. The sun was still shining in the patio, its light reflected from the potbellied little angel in the fountain; the birds still sang; the melody of the cathedral bells continued to announce the hours. But all the household was sad. Still a mere child, I had double pneumonia, and the family doctor held out no hope for my recovery. Mother had had oil lamps and candles lit to all the wonder-working saints of her acquaintance, and the doctor came to see me several times a day. Behind my bed, Presentación had hung a scapular with a black Virgin who, she claimed, performed miracles in curing the illnesses of childhood. Despite these human and supernatural ministrations, I hovered between life and death for twenty days before the doctor announced that I had passed the crisis. Mother, in her delight, accompanied him to the outer hall. When she crossed the threshold of my room and walked on toward the patio, she was blinded for some moments by the light. From the very beginning of my illness she had not left my darkened room. For twenty days and nights, almost without food or sleep, she had disputed my life with death.

Such self-denial is common among Venezuelan mothers. Like mothers generally in South America, they are counselor and guide, friend and confidant, and above all, if you will pardon a metaphor taken from mechanics, shock-absorber against the blows of life on growing children. Some writers who

have attempted to compare the Latin American woman with the North American have expressed unfavorable opinions of the former. They maintain that our women contribute nothing to the growth of society and humanity; in contrast they offer the pioneer woman of North America. Ours, they say, are more or less parasites, with only the biological mission of bearing children and the economic functions of overseers and servants to their men.

No idea could be more erroneous. Those who share it forget that we live inside. Our city houses with their bare outer walls and their street windows almost always closed are symbolic. We, too, have had pioneer women, and for that matter have them still. But they are modest, silent pioneers, and their work is done within the four walls of a house. That is why they are so little known.

What we call house management in Venezuela is not quite the same as housekeeping in the United States, especially that of your larger cities. House management involves many varied labors. In Venezuela women do not go to market but send the cook or telephone the order. Figuring accounts with the cook is one of the first duties of the day, mathematically a curious performance. You should see Mother writing out figures on the bread paper. Of course, she will never use it for her accounting until Altagracia, I, and the little servants have hunted for hours for her 'Expenses Diary.' It is one of Mother's best specialties to lose that book. We are always running after it, but strangely enough, whenever we find it, we discover that she has mislaid her reading glasses and when we start another hunting party to find the glasses, then the book has disappeared once more. That is why the bread paper proves so handy.

'We will have to saddle a horse to look for Señora Briceño's book,' is Presentación's favorite expression when the rush starts.

The lady of the house must find the food and plan new and varied dishes from the leftovers. She must be a skilled and



clever manager, for in Venezuela we often live beyond our means. Money is made to spend, and spent it is without too much thinking. Man being habitually a spendthrift, it devolves on the wife to exercise a restraining influence. She is normally more foresighted and concerned about the family's future needs. Whenever, for instance, Father is thinking of going into some fantastic enterprise, Mother will say to him: 'It sounds all right, but first you'd better give me six months' allowance in advance for the house.'

The lady of the house assumes responsibility for the moral and physical well-being of the women and girls in her service, and she thus becomes a sort of mother to them all. She must oversee their food, their dress, their speech, their acts and thoughts. If they are ill, she frequently nurses them as she would the members of her family. She gives them sound advice and sets a good example, without which advice is meaningless. She helps them solve their private difficulties. She interests herself in their education, too, teaching them to read, write, and figure, and to understand basic religious principles. A thousand times I have heard Mother say to a servant:

'Come, repeat the catechism which I gave you yesterday.'

And to another, 'You come, too, and bring me your writing exercise.'

Our women have been criticized as fanatical and pedantic in religion and for accepting it with no effort at analysis, but I have never heard my mother or any other Venezuelan woman teach her servants anything superfluous or unsuited to their simple standards. The servants learn only principles which help them find a little happiness and a thread to lead the way toward dignity. Dignity! That is the Venezuelan woman's leitmotif and for that matter the leitmotif of women throughout South America.

Sometimes Mother, who, because of all she has to think about, cannot always trust her memory, will ask one of the little serving maids out of a clear sky:

'Estefanía, who is God?'

Estefanía, who may be dusting furniture or similarly engaged at the moment, stops her dusting and stands open-mouthed. Eventually she recalls her catechism and defines the indefinable:

'God is a Supreme Being in whom we must believe even if we do not understand Him.'

Words that can be applied amazingly well to human love — believe even if we do not understand! When that is possible, how much jealousy eliminated! How many marriages kept sweet and happy!

After teaching the young girls in their service to define God and to read, their mistresses give some thought to emotional and biological needs. They make every effort to induce the milkman or the baker to marry one of the servants and set up a home for her instead of increasing the number of the country's illegitimate children. Their efforts are not invariably successful, but at least the attempt is made.

Running a Venezuelan household includes the care of domestic creatures, especially those used for food — hens, ducks, turkeys, geese, pigeons, rabbits. These are all raised in the yards behind the houses and killed and eaten in good time. Here also is an opportunity to practice good economy. Rabbitskins, for instance, are cured and put to numerous uses. The breasts of geese make splendid powder puffs, such as never could be bought, I'm sure, in a New York drugstore. Feathers make soft pillows and cushions. We have always had a garden, with tomatoes, chiles, cereals, and flowers. The garden, too, is the province of the mistress of the house.

Everything in the house, tangible or emotional, concerns the wife or mother. All responsibility, material and moral, falls on her. She must always have the house well kept, the servants trained, the meals abundant and well cooked, the children well dressed and well behaved, the garden watered, the livestock in good condition, the financial situation in hand, no light bulbs burned out, plenty of coal for the kitchen

stove, and hot water whenever a bath is wanted. This last, in my opinion, is the hardest obligation of all. The plumbing in Venezuela is often out of order. At least once a week the plumber comes to our house to fix a leaking pipe or faucet or a shower that categorically refuses to perform.

'Someone call the plumber!' was a familiar cry in our house, until Mother decided to have a sort of affiliated plumber-gardener-electrician as a half-permanent servant. He was one of her numerous 'protégés.'

Almost every Venezuelan woman has some knowledge of medicine and uses it on her husband, children, and servants. She can give massage or benevolent bicarbonate, cuppings, plasters, poultices, and injections. Injections are not so widely used in the United States as in Venezuela, where anyone can give one and nothing ever happens. Many country women are skillful midwives and help their women neighbors in their time of need.

Many houses produce their own bread, both corn and wheat. This work is also planned and directed by the mother, and so is the preparation of the refreshing drinks and sweets that are kept on hand. The work of the house is so self-contained that we seldom have recourse to a laundry. The mother oversees the cleaning of the clothes. Men's suits are often done at home; so are evening gowns and other delicate garments.

Possessing great manual skill, women will paint an article of furniture, paper a room, repair a light that is out of order (they certainly need to know how to do this!), knit throws and comforters, mend anything that is broken, prune or graft a plant, cut out and make a gown or hat, and do a thousand things besides. Many mothers make their children's clothes, for we have no big department stores where everything is sold, and women like to show originality in their children's dress. This is true of women's clothes as well. They prefer to make them or to have them made to measure, each one selecting the

material, style, and trimming that suit her taste and needs. Until I was well into my teens, most of what I wore was the product of my mother's needle, shears, and skill.

All these chores and many others that are done every day by Venezuelan women indicate quite clearly that the traditional laziness of the Latin American fair sex is a myth. The character of our women is forged of moral courage; it has to be.

The Venezuelan mother has been assigned a middle ground between man and Heaven. In her big house with its sunlit patios, its flowers, trees, birds, and other creatures, she is the unquestioned ruler of the growing family, servants, livestock, and plants. Usually her husband gives her a free hand in all domestic affairs. He is free to follow his own whims outside, while she has the same right within. The house is woman's kingdom.

I know an imaginative woman who regularly each week decides to move the furniture. Sometimes the wicker set from the gallery that gives on the principal patio is shifted to a bedroom, the bedroom set into the living-room, and ancestral portraits to the bath. A week later the ancestors will occupy the nursery or the gallery, with the wicker furniture in the kitchen, and so on in an endless round. The husband remains perfectly indifferent and unmoved. At most he'll say:

'Moving again? Tell me, Concha, in what part of the house shall I find my handkerchiefs today? I need a clean one.'

Domestic help is also changed or shifted according to the wishes of the mistress of the house. She hires or discharges without consulting anyone, and the husband pays almost no attention to what goes on. One morning at home Father was eating breakfast and reading the world news, which interests him greatly.

'María,' he called suddenly without looking up, 'bring me a grapefruit.'

The maid brought the fruit and set it down before him.

'Here is the grapefruit, sir,' she said. 'My name is not María, but Nicasia.'

Father, my always absent-minded father, raised his eyes from the paper, stared at her a minute, and exclaimed:

'I've never seen you before! You must be new. How long have you been here?'

'Ever since María went,' she answered. 'Two weeks now.'

A woman friend of mine, the quintessence of jealousy, will employ only old or colored servants in her house so that the male members of the family may not fall in love with them.

A girl from the coast, in search of work, presented herself at the house of a newly married little lady. The would-be maid was tall, slender, fair, with big green eyes and a thick head of hair which she wore loose, reaching to her waist. The lady of the house talked with her for quite a time. At last the mistress rose, indicating that the interview was over, and announced frankly:

'Everything you tell me sounds wonderful. Your qualifications are exactly what I want. Your recommendations could not be better. I like everything about you, with one exception which you cannot help — you are altogether too good-looking.'

As the girl started toward the door to try her fortune elsewhere, the lady, taking pity on her, called her back.

'Wait just a minute. I will give you the address of a friend of mine who certainly will be glad to hire you. She is a widow.'

Woman's authority at home is not restricted to the administration, oversight, labors, and duties which I have mentioned. It is much broader, more deeply rooted, responsible, and complex. It extends even to the young lives which are forming, and it exercises a decisive influence on them. Paternal intervention in the training and education of children is almost nonexistent. Man regards this as a woman's field and seldom offers an opinion except in matters of outstanding importance. The mother selects the doctor for her child, his food, clothes, toys, teachers, friends, reading, games, education, schools, baptismal day, first communion, haircut —

everything. Until a child is five or six he almost never leaves the house but lives under the mother's direct and exclusive jurisdiction.

A North American woman once asked me:

'Is it true that there are no children's playgrounds in Venezuela?'

'There are some,' I told her, 'but not as many as the children of our cities need. They are frequented by poor children only, since children of wealthy parents stay at home.'

'What!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'Rich children never get out in the fresh air?'

'Oh, yes, they do, but at home.'

Venezuelan houses are built in such a form that they receive plenty of air, light, and sun. Children spend their days under the trees in the yard and get there all the sunshine vitamins and all the oxygen they require. They are not exposed to the dangers of street traffic or the dust raised by pedestrians and vehicles and are always under the watchful maternal eye. In the streets and squares of Venezuelan cities you will not see a single perambulator or go-cart, a fact that tourists comment on.

As plants grow under the gardener's zealous care, so children develop under the mother's watchful eye. Mothers with six, seven, and eight children of tender age spend their whole day, advising, scolding, petting, punishing, and rewarding their offspring. When to all this you add the oversight of four or five servants, you will realize that a mother's life is full of responsibilities and cares.

These first years of childhood and those which follow, when the child is still closely bound to his home, are decisive influences in future life. This so-called education in the family circle is the basis for all future character building and bears the real stamp of the creator. Like an amphora which will always keep the shape of the mold which formed it, whatever the wine it may contain, a man will always retain the pattern of his early training. The manners and ideas which he ac-

quires in the bosom of his family will accompany him through life, although several layers of veneer may cover them in time. The mother is almost exclusively responsible for this first and basic education.

Many a mother, through widowhood, divorce, or similar misfortune, has found herself forced to undertake all the phases of her children's training, material and spiritual. One such recently arrived in New York on a pleasure trip. Thirty-six years old, with a long bob, she is pretty, jolly, agreeable, and young-looking. At parties all the men wanted to dance with her, and one, at least, proposed. Her name is Margot. Well, Margot has eight children and two grandchildren. She was married at fifteen and left a widow at twenty-four, with nothing but the memory of her husband to help in the support of the family. She tried the modest and familiar methods then open to woman. Her fingers are deformed from making sweets to sell. Her eight children are grown now, educated and prepared for life, and two of the girls are married. Each of the children contributed something from his savings to give her a vacation in New York, and she well deserved it.

Another woman, Carmen, whose husband was stricken with paralysis, had to assume the responsibility for the home. With a better intellectual preparation and less bound by tradition than Margot, she took her husband's place in business. Today she operates one of the finest cosmetic shops in the capital.

At twenty-eight Leonor, left a widow with six children, engaged in social service work.

María, who took over her sick husband's position, is recognized today as an able broker. Thanks to her spiritual and practical oversight, her children are full of promise.

There are hundreds like Margot, Carmen, Leonor, and María. Each of them has shown, when it was necessary, that in addition to being the angel of the home she can be a builder of prosperity.

Spanish America has had many great women through the

ages. With their slight preparation in financial matters, it is remarkable to see how they have confronted life. A little more education and social freedom ought to make it possible for Venezuelan women to work wonders. They need some political education also. They know nothing about politics and care less. Governments can come and go and they feel very little concerned. However, there was a time when Venezuelan women did care about politics.

I was approaching fifteen years old and Father gave me my choice of a dance or a vacation trip to Europe. I selected the trip because I knew he would give the party anyhow. Mother asked me to choose between an elegant new dress and a horse and I declined both. When she asked what I did want I said: 'A revolver!'

I can still picture her expression. She insisted on knowing why I wanted such a present, but I would not tell her. That would have been like betraying a state secret, a very important secret that was all my own; no more nor less than the assassination of the tyrant Juan Vicente Gómez, for twenty years president of Venezuela. And I was not the only child, the only woman, who nourished such unfriendly sentiments for Gómez. Children without exception, and the great majority of adults too, felt the same way. Juan Vicente Gómez, in the eyes of many, was the incarnation of all evil, cruelty, treachery, and baseness. Hatred blossomed like a strange, monstrous, anachronistic flower in female breasts accustomed hitherto to love. A Venezuelan woman's heart grows and flourishes in the warmth of love, but the violence of this new sensation made it almost as voluptuous.

We are a people of deep and strong emotions. As a result, whatever ill befell the country or its people was immediately ascribed to Gómez. If the coffee crop was bad, Gómez was to blame; if the price of butter rose, Gómez was to blame; if we had a high percentage of illiterates, the fault was his; if rice, the staple food of our lower classes, must be imported instead of being grown at home, the fault was his; if we

sold our petroleum crude, thereby losing the substantial profits of refining, the fault was his; if the cost of living was high and salaries low, the fault was his; if woman found no place in the country's social movement, the fault was his; if mortality was high for want of proper hygiene, the fault was his; if the monopolies he established killed existing industry, the fault was his; if he granted foreign powers long-term concessions that were burdensome to Venezuelans, the fault was his; if there was too little irrigation, if agriculture suffered, if industry was at a standstill, the fault was his; if the streetcars in Caracas and Valencia moved at a turtle's pace (they still do), the fault was his; if the people were powerless to elect their representatives, if the plutocrats were rotten to their marrow, the fault was his; if Venezuela stagnated under a system of medieval politics and semicolonial commerce, the fault was his, and his alone. The litany of guilt and sin could be continued to infinity. No wonder we women hated him!

As you may suspect, I never killed Gómez, never got my revolver or became a martyr of liberty, although I always dreamed of becoming a new Charlotte Corday.

The educational principles of Venezuelan mothers are demonstrated in two different ways. Some of them maintain that the mother must exercise unquestioned authority, that the child should feel profound respect for her and obey her wishes without asking or expecting explanations. Others feel that the closest bonds are those of understanding and real friendship. However the mother may feel, whatever may appear upon the surface, the basic fact remains that her love and abnegation, too deep for words, supply aid and counsel whenever her children have need of them.

The mothers who advocate authority have certain established formulas. They will tell a child:

'You must do what Mother says without answering back.'

In reply to questions asked and orders given, the child is expected to say:

'Yes, Mama. No, Mama.'

My brother and I call our mother simply 'my pretty' and Father 'the old man.'

A delightful custom which developed more than four hundred years ago is still preserved and cultivated by every mother. That is the asking of the blessing. One of the first phrases that a child learns in its entirety is the blessing. As children, whenever my brother and I were going out, when we came in, when we got up or went to bed, we always kissed Mother on the face and said:

'The blessing, Mother.'

Then she would kiss us and say:

'God bless you, my children.' Usually she added: 'Mind what Presentación tells you on the street.'

Now that we are grown, we still preserve the custom. When we are going out and can't find her, we may ask her blessing from the gallery with the voice of a lottery ticket vendor if we are in a hurry. From the depths of the house her beloved voice will answer:

'God bless you! Come home early.'

So important is this traditional formula that once when I went out in a hurry and forgot to call to Mother, she was offended.

Blessings are also asked of fathers, grandparents, godparents, and aunts and uncles, but only when a child is small. As he grows up he will forget the habit and ask the blessing only of his father and mother and possibly his grandparents.

My cousin, when he reached the horrible age of ten or twelve, discovered that each time he called upon his godfather he received a coin, sometimes a whole bolívar, worth around thirty cents, United States currency. For a youngster of his age that represented the wealth of the Orient; so he decided to call as frequently as possible. Having no valid reason for appearing every day, he had recourse to the blessing.

'The blessing, godfather,' he would say, his hand already itching for the coin. 'I have come all the way from home to ask your blessing.'

The godfather, with a twinkle in his eye as he produced the money, would answer slyly:

'The blessing, is it? Mm! Well, this one I'm giving you must last until day after tomorrow.'

Calling on godfathers for blessings and appearing on the street at will after they have reached the age of ten are not the only privileges of Venezuelan boys. They enjoy an amount of freedom never granted to girls. Until she is a full-grown woman, a girl cannot appear alone upon the street in Venezuela. And even then her outings unaccompanied are few. Cristina, a little fourteen-year-old friend of mine, distinguished equally for her precocity and for her passion for strawberries and cream, used to say in a voice out of the *Comédie Française*:

'How I envy boys! They don't have to spend the day combing their hair in order to look clean and tidy. No one ever tells them to pull down their clothes so as not to show their legs. No one ever orders them to embroider and practice on the piano.'

'All that is negative, Cristina,' I interrupted. 'If all you want is to do nothing, I shall begin to think you're lazy.'

'No, that isn't the whole story,' she assured me, automatically pulling her skirt down over her knees. 'Boys can go out without having a relative or servant with them; they can see every kind of moving picture, good or bad; they can read all kinds of books and listen to every sort of conversation. Why? Because they don't have to bother about that blessed modesty and innocence.'

Speaking of modesty in Venezuela is like speaking of dollars in the United States, the navy in England, tulips in the Netherlands, the Parthenon in Greece, freedom in France, and the tango in Argentina.

'Innocence is woman's most precious possession,' you will often hear it said.

The innocence of childhood becomes the modesty of maturity. One leads the other over a rocky road that needs careful watching.

Innocence consists in total ignorance of sexual matters or the source of life. A girl of twelve, fourteen, or even older, believing that babies come from Paris or are brought over the housetops by the stork, is the perfect embodiment of innocence and delights a certain type of mother. The mother who sees her daughter married in such a state of innocence assumes a tremendous responsibility.

Modesty is a different matter. Modesty, or respectability, if you will, and obvious feminine dignity are a part of any good education, and rightly so. But an innocence that is preserved too long is absurd and cries for a simple, straightforward explanation of the sexual life. It is far more meritorious to accept or renounce something that we know about than to abstain from something of which we are wholly ignorant. Without temptations, Saint Anthony never would have been Saint Anthony. Ninety-nine per cent of Venezuelan women of a certain social level bring the gift of virginity to their marriage. It is a tradition and a custom, but it is far more commendable in a woman who is aware of the sexual mysteries than in an innocent who still thinks that babies come by parcel post from Paris.

Young Lady, the Convent!

WHEN I WAS about thirteen — that is beginning to be long ago — there was a family conference to decide what to do with me. In accordance with our custom, girls from twelve to fifteen years of age have parties and little dances to which they invite boys of the same age or a little older. They are elaborately dressed for these occasions, for luxury is an indispensable element of Venezuelan social life. Since there are no chaperons, at most only a maid who watches from the second patio, and inasmuch as women in the tropics mature more rapidly than elsewhere, while males are amorous and ardent from the cradle, these parties are productive of flirtations and platonic little love affairs — entirely and perfectly platonic, limited to verses, flowers, glances, sighs, and blushes.

Sometimes it happens that these platonic childhood friendships, beginning at an early age, continue to maturity and end in matrimony. There are plenty of women who fell in love with their husbands at eleven and married them at fifteen or sixteen.

When it came time to decide what to do with me, there was no prospect of my being compromised by any smooth-faced boy. No, my sin was spending all my time at parties and exhibiting a deep, Olympian scorn of anything that resembled work or study. My sole interest was in sports, the adventures of Buffalo Bill, dances, and the flattery of little boys who told me I was pretty and then blushed to the roots of their hair.

All that, as I say, seemed to me the very apex of desire and highly interesting. But my parents were not of my opinion.

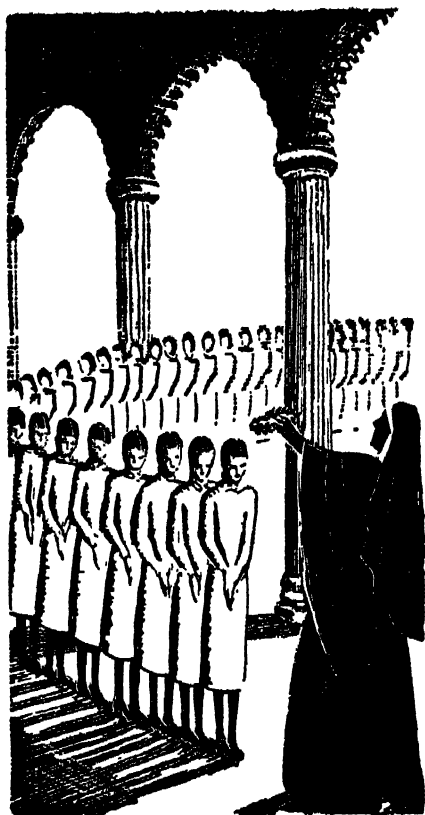
After considering numerous drastic possibilities, they chose the most drastic of them all and sent me to the convent as a boarder. Mother, seeing me on the verge of tears, might have relented; but Aunt Isabel, unyielding and well-versed in the social code, insisted:

'All respectable Caracas girls have a convent education. They put me in a convent when I was ten. Olga, according to that, is three years behindhand.'

Confronted by the great truth that all respectable Caracas girls are educated by nuns, Mother could only acquiesce. This state of things goes back to 1768, when girls' schools run by nuns were started. One sunny day, but dark for me, Mother, feeling more heroic than Iphigenia's father leading her to sacrifice, took me to the convent. With tears in her eyes, Presentación made my departure even more dramatic by bidding me farewell at the front door. Dogs barked; Father seemed less far away than usual; my brother Héctor asked if he might inherit my camera; the cook delivered an oration; and Aunt Isabel looked satisfied.

At the convent I would be shut off from all contact with the world. No appearing on the street, no telephoning, no books, no casual letters, were permitted. Parents and near relatives might call between three and four on Sunday afternoons. Above all, there would be no dancing, bouquets, or boyish compliments.

The minute the door had closed on Mother and I was left in the vaulted gallery of the convent, I knew that a real change had come into my life. Down the hall came the two hundred pupils all in line, dressed in blue uniforms that violated all canons of good taste, with the most unattractive hairdos imaginable. Fear of the flesh in human form is so great in a convent that even girls of five and six are made to wear uniforms with long sleeves, high necks, and skirts well below their knees.



As the girls passed by, two hundred pairs of eyes were fastened on me, filled with curiosity about my clothes, my shoes, my hair, my whole aspect of the outer world. In the horrible monotony of the life they lived, poor things, any detail became tremendously important. From every mouth there came a murmur:

'The new girl! The new girl!'

I must confess that the convent atmosphere had me down from the first moment. I immediately lost all my spunk and eagerness, and asked a nun to put me in my uniform at once. I wanted to lose myself in the crowd.

It is not alone the flesh which suffers the condemnation of the nuns. Life is a long series of taboos and prohibitions. The window grilles are both material and moral. Everything, in short, that's human, spontaneous, biological, and natural is frowned upon, and attempts are made to suppress it. What little a child has left to live on is rigid, false, oppressive, and unnatural.

Among all taboos, the first is man. He is Public Enemy Number One. Girls may not speak of him or have any communication with him, and are not supposed to even think of him! Sometimes, by chance, they escape this sentence because of a father, brother, or some other relative; but aside from these few members of the family, it can truthfully be said that the convent countenances nothing masculine. The teachers and the servants are all women. In my day the only male about the place was a gardener so old that he must have had termites in his weary joints; we children, at least, were thoroughly convinced of it and would have been delighted to tell him so if the poor old man had not kept a highly respectable distance from us.

In anatomy classes, as was to be expected, the slightest intimate detail concerning man, and male animals as well, was carefully excluded.

Naturally, all problems involving sexual life, children, birth, and matrimony not only went unmentioned, but were

repudiated. It was as if none of those children were intended to take an active part in life and fulfill woman's great function in matrimony. Girls who somehow learned about such things were regarded as perverted.

The second taboo, Public Enemy Number Two, is the World, with its luxury, pomp, and vanity. The World — with a capital letter — includes everything outside the convent walls. It is mentioned with fear, disdain, mystery, and repugnance. If one of us, for example, after a day's leave — a miracle that happened once each month — returned with a colored ribbon in her hair, some nun invariably would say: 'Take that worldly thing off!'

Snatching a moment when we were not watched, I once taught my friends the steps of a new dance — the Charleston, as I remember — hidden from view behind my wardrobe doors. It spread throughout the convent like an epidemic. In line, at play, and in the dining-room, the girls were throwing themselves around like epileptics. One of them told me she had overheard a nun, discussing the dreadful evil with another, say:

'I don't know how the World manages to penetrate the convent walls.'

The answer was plain enough: through the wardrobe and imaginations fired with silence and grilled windows — particularly with silence. Aside from four hours or less during which we were free to talk and play, twenty weary hours daily were passed in silence. To require that of little girls of six, ten, or fourteen is to put a strain on human endurance. There were no sports and no organized games at all.

Some pools where we might have swum served only to supply water for our washbowls; we bathed, but from the outside, as it were. Standing at the edge, each of us would receive a little washbowl. We dipped them in the pool and poured the water over ourselves, the way they bathe horses; half of it ran down the folds of our bathing-suits, long, wrap-perlike arrangements which hung below our knees, full

enough to encompass three small children, and with a bit of sleeve. We had to soap our bodies through these wrappers of heavy Vichy cloth, and that called for much patience and more soap.

This strange performance went on in the open air, in a patio slippery from former soapings. The efforts we made and the difficulties we encountered in getting the wrappers on and off, undressing before the watching nuns and other children, drying ourselves, and getting dressed again, without displaying a single bit of flesh, assumed proportions truly epic. My seat-mate in my classes admitted years later that this ability was the only thing her convent education gave her.

Public Enemy Number Three was flesh, the soft padding of the human frame. There was constant worry lest we show our figures or our legs, which, covered with thick black ribbed stockings, could not have been less lovely.

With all this severity and boredom, our only outlet was to discuss forbidden subjects — love, the World, men. Again and again we recounted our flirtations. A gawky little boy friend, with changing voice and no trace of hair upon his face, would become in our account a dazzling hero, a second Don Juan Tenorio. We endowed him with extraordinary prowess and even dreamed at times that he would come like Don Quixote to demolish the convent walls and bring us flowers. Our imaginations, inflamed by confinement and the lack of proper guidance, manufactured all manner of fantastic and idiotic adventures.

We had strange means of speaking of the nuns or of our beaux — catch phrases, numbers, cryptograms, gestures, grimaces, whistling, and scrambled names. Once, for example, bursting with pride and under the very nostrils of a nun, I said to my friend Josefina:

‘Do you know whom I saw on my day’s leave? Rosita. She was right outside the door, waiting for me with a beautiful bouquet of carnations. I love Rosita.’

By Rosita I meant Rafael, my little boy friend of the mo-

ment. Of course there had not been any Rosita-Rafael, with or without carnations, lurking around the convent; if there had been, Father would have had a thing or two to say.

Seeing the nun raise her brows suspiciously, I added, oozing innocence:

‘You know who Rosita is, don’t you? She’s our cook.’

The convent was much more a place of discipline and retirement from the world than an educational institution. Our studies were purely arbitrary and unrelated to the official program of Venezuelan public instruction. A girl who left the convent after completing every study it offered would still be far from ready for admission to a university. The most that she could carry away with her was a prize of stupid storybooks or laurel wreaths. These wreaths were wretched affairs of gummed paper; yet, the first time I felt one on my head and heard the applause of my two hundred schoolmates and their parents honoring my scholastic achievements, I was intensely moved. That moment, I admit quite frankly, kindled in me an appetite for bigger and better laurels and applause. Gummed paper lured me into a career of printed pages.

After little more than a year of boarding school, the spirit of independence which had been developing within me like some cramped exotic plant enabled me to persuade my parents that I needed a little trip to Europe. The provincial mannerisms which convent life had given me, I told them, needed polishing. I was wearing the convent’s dress-up uniform; with my hair sleeked into a bun at the nape of my neck like a suffragette, my black ribbed stockings, boots also black and reaching halfway up my legs, nose shining, cheeks pale, I felt myself a fright.

I was almost fifteen, the age at which Venezuelan girls come out socially. The thought of this, along with my ridiculous appearance, touched off some maternal vanity. Mother, moreover, is so full of feeling that the mere sight of tears moves and touches her tremendously. She is capable of every sacrifice to save anyone at all from pain. I blackmailed her

with tears. The outcome was that one day, with my little package of prize books in one hand and in the other my paper laurel wreath, from which I would not be parted, I left the convent for good.

That was quite a few years ago. Convent education in Venezuela, in Caracas at any rate, has changed a bit since then. The prescribed course of study has been adjusted to the requirements of the Ministry of Public Instruction. I understand, although it seems incredible, that they even have professors of the outlawed gender.

A bachelor's degree, with us, admits to the university and enrollment in preparation for a career — law, medicine, engineering, what not. Unlike the United States, where universities grant the bachelor's degree, we must have one before admission. Venezuelans who go to North America to study find it very inconvenient to have to devote several semesters to securing another as a preliminary to studying for any higher degree.

What is called preparatory school in Venezuela and Latin America in general is higher than the high school in the United States, but not quite as comprehensive as the North American liberal arts college. Subjects taken in the upper courses of colleges hereabouts are included in the curriculum of professional schools in Latin America. This explains why professional schools require more time in Latin America than in the United States. For instance, one must spend five years at law school in order to become a lawyer; in some countries medicine and engineering schools require six years.

Our universities are good, and the instruction they offer is free. This is likewise true of our public schools and preparatory schools, often called *colegios*. A boy can enter kindergarten at four or five and continue all the way through the university until he is fitted to practice medicine or law, all without payment of a cent for tuition. A fine thing, this, and an evidence of our national culture.

As early as 1821, the liberators of Venezuela, who also were

her legislators, introduced compulsory education. Venezuela was the first country of the Americas to take this step and one of the first in the whole world. In 1870, to round out this laudable policy, education was declared both compulsory and free.

Many poor students attend our universities. Small groups of those who cannot afford enough light at home often gather in the public squares to study beneath the street lamps. There they read their books, carry on scientific arguments, and forget whether their evening meal was frugal. From such as these, illustrious names in arts and letters and the sciences have arisen in the past and will again.

In proof of our inherent love of culture, the first formal institution for primary instruction was established back in the sixteenth century, twenty-four years after the founding of Caracas, as the result of the unselfish interest of a forbear of our great liberator who also bore the name of Simón Bolívar.

Due to the repeated objections of Spanish monarchs, who looked askance at the spread of culture in Venezuela, a land of restless men, it was not until 1725 that a university was established at Caracas. The University of San Marcos, in Lima, Peru, had been founded in 1551, and that of Mexico on January 25, 1553, both prior to Harvard, which is the oldest in the United States.

At the beginning, the courses in Caracas' university were primarily philosophical and theological. Escalona y Calatayud, its founder, was a bishop and was assisted in his efforts by the clergy, always the leading force in Latin American culture in those days. The university's first anatomical laboratory was established in 1876.

Until 1935, our universities were a closed world to women. At Caracas, for example, only two studious and courageous women had ever been admitted; in spite of the prejudice and criticism of their masculine fellow students, they acquired degrees in chemistry. One of these pioneers, Lola Bertorelli,

today operates one of the best analytical laboratories in the city.

Always fond of innovations, I attempted to enroll as a student of chemistry; it was the only department in which I could have found female companions. I talked, argued, studied, prepared myself, and passed my examinations for admission. Mother accompanied me, and I can remember her hands trembling for fear I would fail. I suspect they trembled even more when she learned that I had been accepted! Everything went smoothly until it came time for my first class. Then a family conference was called to persuade me to give up my absurd ambition.

'You will lose all standing, attending a man's university,' Aunt Isabel insisted in every tone of voice. She is the social arbiter of the family and is always mixing into matters that do not concern her. 'Your own standing, and your family's, too.'

Plenty of the others talked the same way. Finally Mother, who knows me best of all and is always ready to help anyone to find himself, said:

'Listen, child, you know that in our circle it is not thought proper for a girl, especially for one as young as you, to attend the university. It may cause us all embarrassment, and it will mean a lot of difficulty for your father and your brother. However, if you think that that is your vocation and you'll be happy as a chemist, go ahead.'

'Chemists! Glasses on all day, and hands smelling of all sorts of dreadful messes and explosives,' added Aunt Conchita.

I announced at last that in view of all that the family would have to suffer, I would renounce my plans.

Generosity had nothing to do with my decision. The possibility of having to handle involved equations scared me. But I had to organize an honorable retreat. What better pretext than the reputation of the family?

Women students find their way smoothed at the university

now. A few years ago I enrolled again, intending to secure a teacher's diploma. By this time there was no risk of any members of my family losing anything. In the Caracas Pedagogical Institute, where our teachers are trained, women make up about half the student body. Today we have woman doctors, lawyers, dentists, academicians, geologists, chemists, professors, aviators — everything. The only thing we lack, and this proves that I am not the only minus-quantity mathematical genius, is a woman engineer. As a result of the atavistic nature of our education, Venezuelan women's minds are not yet precision instruments.

The professional staffs of our universities have always been very good. They include men like Doctor Francisco A. Rísquez, who died not long ago at almost ninety, after giving a tremendous impulse to the spread of medical knowledge. He established the first training school for nurses. Our university staffs have been invigorated by many able professors who were driven out of Spain by the civil war. The intolerance of Franco and his followers has enriched South America.

With the death of the tyrant Gómez in 1935, Venezuela underwent a happy transformation, especially in the world of women. Until that time women's education was regarded as an accomplishment at best, never as basic and indispensable. No woman had any incentive to improve her mind. Neither society nor her husband cared. A woman who had had a primary schooling and had sampled the upper grades or who had completed a course of study in a convent was thought sufficiently prepared. In the arbitrary curriculum of the convents, the principal classes were conducted in a foreign language, usually French, and took in sewing and embroidery, piano and violin, painting, a bit of French history, and a smattering of geography. Anything else that was offered was no more than elementary. After she was married a woman might endeavor to make up for her deficiencies by reading, but always her basic training was insufficient and shaky.

Few people ever attempt to do more than is expected of

them. That, perhaps, explains why so few Venezuelan women aspire to an education better than the average. However, since the death of Gómez, I repeat, a desire to cultivate the mind has developed among our young women. A thirst for knowledge has even percolated upward to the older generation. A Venezuelan widow in New York is attending the same high school as her fourteen-year-old daughter, with the hope of eventually securing the degree of Bachelor of Science; she takes herself matter-of-factly, but to me she is a bright symbol of the spirit of the new Venezuela, eager for knowledge and progress.

On numerous occasions I have come upon Mother, hidden in some corner of the house, studying arithmetic in order to help her granddaughters Misty and Yarima.

Once we would have thought it rather cute for a woman to say about a book: 'I'm not reading it because there's too much black on white.' Or, 'The only things I care about in magazines are the fashions, the funnies, and the crossword puzzles.'

Today such statements have lost almost all their charm.

Girls of the newer generation discuss Marcel Proust, Bergson, Stekel, Pestalozzi, Matallana, Piccard, Vasconcelos, Rodó, and other thoughtful writers with intelligence and understanding.

A cultural recrudescence, a renaissance of the feminine mind, is in process; perhaps, too, there is a desire for equality with man. In any case, whether a woman belongs to respectable society or is a nobody, she no longer has to pay respect to hoary traditions by being shut up in a convent and bathing in wrappers made of Vichy cloth.

The public schools attended by the masses give no religious instruction, in contrast to those of the religious orders, where respectable children receive their education. The tallest building in Caracas and indeed in all Venezuela is a Jesuit college — I won't say how many floors. Not as tall as Radio City, anyway.

Although our educational system is good in urban centers, it still leaves much to be desired in country districts and small towns. We need more schools, more materials, more teachers properly prepared. We need more agricultural schools and more technicians in every field. Now I am putting my finger on the sore spot of education in South America in general and Venezuela in particular.

Too many students prepare for the liberal professions such as medicine, law, and engineering, too few for agriculture, mechanics, industry, stock-raising, mining, fishing, shipping. We need fewer backs bent over encyclopedias and more over our good earth. We need professional schools of every kind — for mining, agriculture, fishery, stock-farming, zoology, metallurgy, hygiene, arboriculture, botany, agronomy, and so on — in order that Venezuela's sons may learn to value the vast potential riches of their land.

Dust and Dances

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN, my parents gave a dance at our home to present me socially. Parties in Venezuela are occasions of lavish splendor. We have a fondness for the expensive, the luxurious and elaborate. No one thinks of inviting friends to his house without giving them the best and choicest that he has.

Our houses are always sparkling clean, but whenever there is to be a dinner or a party of any sort the women give them a general grooming from yard to drawing-room. No detail is overlooked. Tiled floors are washed with soda, then waxed and rubbed until they shine like mirrors. Furniture is polished, lights rearranged, vases filled with flowers, and fresh covers placed on all the stands and tables.

Before a guest arrives, the household is as busy as a beehive on the move or an anthill in storage time. Servants never rest, but little children must, lest they soil their clothes, or else they are sent out for the day so as not to interrupt the labors of domestic hygiene. The lady of the house wanders back and forth, observing, watching, giving orders, for all the world like a ship's captain in a hurricane.

When the festive hour arrives, not a speck of dust remains. Everything is as bright and shining as a moonlit pool. Quite possibly the lady of the house is weary and the guests do not notice her carefully studied effects, but the house is aquiver with voluptuous cleanliness.

Once I announced to Mother that I had invited some friends next day for tea and dancing. Mother, the organizer, replied:

'All right! We'll have to call Francisco to trim the shrubbery in the garden.'

'But, Mother,' I protested, 'my friends are coming to have tea with me, not to see the garden.'

Without stopping work on the slippers she was knitting for some poor child, Mother developed this argument:

'The flowers are the garden, aren't they? And the garden is the house, and the house the place you live in, and the place you live in a reflection of yourself. You wouldn't want your friends to see you with your hair uncombed, would you?'

'Have it your own way, Mercedita,' I replied, calling Mother by her name and throwing her a kiss.

However hard I try to explain to Mother or to my conservative cousin Altagracia, that my friends come to see me and not to check up on the dust in the lion's mouth on the dresser or the water in the vase of lilies, I make no progress. Both of them assure me that respectability shows itself in the smallest details. They must be right, but I still think that if visiting days mean days of extra work and weariness, it's better to see your friends in their own houses. To make my cousin furious, I used to remark:

'Ramiro Casona will be coming in a couple of months to call on Altagracia. It's high time to begin polishing the mango trees.'

Preparations for a dance begin well ahead; just how long depends on the importance of the occasion. Two leading questions are behind the whole performance: Whom shall we invite? What are we going to give them? When we have solved these two problems we have hold of a thread like Ariadne's to guide us through the labyrinth.

Who is coming? Elimination is the usual process of choice. The So-and-So's must not be invited, because they are very common. The X's have had a little scandal in their family,



and no one is asking them anywhere right now while it is fresh. The Z's are wet blankets. The Y's did not ask us to their last party; Elena Y has a sunburn, anyway, and doesn't want to expose her neck and shoulders until it's cured. Margarita P is not going out while her fiancé is traveling . . . in the United States, for pleasure. Mrs. M can't come without her husband, and he is away in the mountains.

The invitations issued by an aristocratic family must take into account not only the character and standing of the invitee, but that of the two generations before him. Someone, for example, may remark:

'So-and-So doesn't deserve to be invited, but his grandmother was such a distinguished woman!' Or, 'We wouldn't know Zutano's folks outside their house, but he is such a gentleman, and so respectable. . . .'

After much deliberation the invitations are at last sent out in astronomical numbers. Omitting someone who should have been included is as bad as inviting someone undesirable. It is a diplomatic incident.

And now what are we going to give them?

We Venezuelans marvel at the ease with which parties are given in North America. A cocktail party, for example, is just a cocktail party in the United States. Drinks and some little thing to eat — potato chips, almonds, crackers, tiny anchovy or cheese sandwiches. One or two things at most. Some of us think highly of the system, others not. But it is no go in Venezuela. There, quantities of different things are served — crackers, pastries, sweets and salads, sandwiches, turkey, galantines, jellies; tiny *hallacas* or turnovers, *tequeños*, cakes, and caviar.

Once when I had invited friends for cocktails and didn't want to have the house upset, the tiles all polished, or the garden trimmed, I said nothing to Mother until half an hour before the guests arrived. Wishing to try out the North American system, so convenient for the hostess, I had ordered cakes from the pastry shop, along with toasted almonds and

some English cheese. I arranged everything attractively on the same table with the cocktails. This also was an innovation; normally we keep passing the refreshments. Everything seemed all right to me, but I noticed that my friends appeared to be awaiting something — something, obviously, which did not arrive. Poor Mother was sweating blood and water, but when the guests had departed I announced triumphantly: 'Now, Mother dear, you see what I mean about parties! — the North American way, without much bother.'

But Mother was thoroughly opposed to my North American innovation. With her usual deliberation she informed me:

'Books and travel, my child, have made you lose all thought of the conventions. I assure you those people are saying right this minute that if they had known, they would have eaten before coming over.'

In a country where the home is the center of social life, it is natural that a dance or any other party should have great significance. A dance, of course, is the social event *par excellence*. That being so, it is not surprising that so much thought is given to the invitations and refreshments. An invitation to a certain house may constitute a sort of social recognition.

Parties are held in the halls, living-rooms, and gardens. The living-rooms usually have windows on the street which are opened only on special occasions. Anyone outside can then look through them the whole length of the house. Quite naturally, when the sound of music, talk, and laughter floats from the house and it is full of flowers and lights and men and women in evening dress are moving about in it, passers-by stop to look in at the fun. Nothing is more contagious than curiosity. As soon as one has stopped, others follow suit, and by the time the dancing begins a great crowd of spectators has gathered at the windows. Always gallant, the men outside give the women the front places, where the view is best. Sometimes it happens that a friend who the party-givers thought was out of town or whose address was lost is discovered in this

gallery of uninvited spectators. The host goes to the window, explains the situation, and begs the friend to come in. Something approaching a battle of wills ensues between the host's 'yes' and the outsider's 'no,' until some wag remarks:

'Don't be foolish, man! Can't you see the goings-on are pretty good in there?'

If the invitee remains unmoved, the worried host suggests: 'At least do me the favor of accepting a little nip.'

The offer is always accepted; through the iron grille the two friends drink their mutual health, and each goes about his business.

When a party is given by someone who ranks low in the scale or by a government official whom society has not accepted in spite of his power and money, respectable people do not attend, but gather outside. 'I was only in the gallery' is equivalent to 'I do not mingle with them.' Conversely, to be able to announce that some high personage was 'at my party' is often a passport to respectability.

Frequently, as a party nears its end, the hosts send out refreshments to the people of the gallery, regardless of color, social standing, or acquaintance. Perhaps a romantic bystander will then ask to have something of Carmen Miranda's played and the notes of 'Mama eu quero' will be heard.

Like many customs, the picturesque gallery is tending to disappear now, though more for geographic than for evolutionary reasons. Wealthy people now usually live outside the city in houses surrounded by gardens.

At Venezuelan parties everything is danced — fox-trot, one-step, jitterbug, and boogie-woogie from the United States; waltzes and mazurkas from Austria; the Spanish *paso doble*; Cuban rumbas, congas, *sones*, *danzones*, and boleros; the rhythmic machiche from Brazil; the Argentine tango; our own *joropo*; and the incomparable *barlovento*, which originated on the Venezuelan coffee plantations.

The *joropo* is the most popular of all our Venezuelan regional dances. Country women in dresses of bright-colored cotton

print, their flowing hair adorned with flowers and tiny combs, and men in white suits and new *alpargatas*, with a song on their lips and rhythm in their bodies, will gather for a dance to celebrate pay-day, seedtime, harvest, the birth or christening of a child, the engagement or marriage of a friend. The *joropo* is in order on any festive occasion.

The guests assemble in the big room of a ranch house. The girls, in their Sunday best, sit on benches against the walls waiting to be asked to dance. When the fun begins, they do their utmost to win an invitation with the coquetry of rolling eyes, smiles, and blushes. Older women never dance in the city, but in the country they often do.

'Here comes the music!' someone shouts, and immediately the rattle of *maracas* starts.

The *maraquero* also sings. With one foot on a chair and eyes closed, he shakes his *maracas* lightly. He is improvising the couplets he will sing that evening, and will keep it up until some dancer, emboldened by a nip of rum, the gaiety around him, or the red lips of a certain girl, asks for the *maracas*, a way of indicating that he wishes to sing, or, rather, to pit his inspiration against the singing *maraquero's*.

This is called a *careo*, or competition among native singers; a sort of tournament of speed and inspiration reminiscent of the literary jousts of the Middle Ages that were followed by battles of flowers. Whatever words are used come with the moment. One singer, for example, begins his song with a couplet in which the word 'summer' figures. His opponent must then reply in kind. Thus a versified conversation is carried on between the two men, on any subject at all, with rhythm, rhyme, and speed. Whenever one of the contestants is forced to halt, his opponent stops shaking the *maracas* to make it obvious to all that he is waiting. If the answer is not forthcoming within a few seconds, he carries on himself. After this has happened several times, he is hailed as the winner of the *careo* by general applause.

Some improvisers are so intelligent, so quick, and such good

poets that they spend their time traveling across the plains like troubadours to compete wherever a *carro* of importance is held. These wandering bards enjoy great popularity, and, like Santos Vega of the Argentine pampa, occasionally become legendary figures. The passion and enthusiasm brought to the competition by the singers are so intense that ill-will develops at times and what began as art ends in hatred.

The *maraquero* and his opponent can hurl couplets back and forth for hours. Their inspiration seems inexhaustible. For themes they range over the wide, grassy *llanos* with their cattle, fast horses, gentle deer, swift rivers like the Arauca, bright-colored birds, wild animals, fires, ranches, *llaneros*, mirages, silence, and grandeur.

Not everyone can dance the *joropo*, for it has many complicated figures. Like all our popular dances, it has its special significance — as I interpret it, in this case, the eternal love-duet of man and woman.

At first, a couple dance as if by mutual agreement, face to face, like people who understand each other and get on well together. Gradually the man introduces new steps, as if to indicate that he might like to go some other way and wants to see if the woman cares to follow. She does. Suddenly they form an arch or bridge with their upraised arms and then change places. The *escobilleo* or sweeping step, from *escoba*, the Spanish word for broom, imitates the movements of that article of household use and is presumably symbolic of cleanliness and industry. But it may also symbolize masculine strength, since the motions of the men's feet suggest a bull pawing the ground before he charges. There are many other rapid and complicated steps in which both dancers join.

On the plains it is a fundamental act of courtesy to allow strangers to dance the first measures by themselves. The custom, I imagine, goes back to slave days, for the *joropo* was originally a Negro dance, and the white owner or his majordomo gave countenance to a party by being present at the start to open the proceedings. Whenever there was a *joropo*

at our cattle ranch on the plains, Father and I had to open the dance.

Watching Father use his legs with skill and gusto, despite his fifty-odd years, our peons were moved to say: 'You certainly know how the *joropo* should be danced, Colonel!'

Venezuela — like Kentucky — has had so many colonels that the word has come to indicate merely affection and respect and may be applied to any man of good bearing.

Venezuelans, men and women alike, are devotees of dancing. With us, rhythm is natural and inborn.

Boys and girls, even the very young, as almost everywhere, expect to dance every dance at a party. Older people are likely to dance only from time to time, since they may prefer to talk; we are also devotees of conversation.

Women who are left sitting without being asked to dance are 'eating turkey.' I do not know what the origin of the term may be, but I imagine it goes back to former days when a woman, left alone, went immediately to the cupboard to find herself a sweet or a little slice of turkey. This was a pretext, that no one, even she, might realize her desperate situation.

Any woman can dance a devastating rumba with the writhings of a serpent. Yet no respectable woman, no woman who values her position, will move her hips while dancing at a party, even among close friends; it would be considered vulgar. If a man should do so, she will complain at once, since otherwise it will be thought that he puts her down for a nobody.

It is curious that in the tropics, the cradle of the rumba and the conga, cultivated people do not sway while dancing. On the other hand, the countries which borrow such dances absorb their inspiration from the very fountainhead of the common people and do not tone them down.

The first time I visited a 'Latin' night club in New York, I was amazed at the exaggerated movements of the men and women. At home we would see all that only in low-life cabarets and gatherings of the lower classes, but in the United

States it is good form and an evidence of the dancer's skill. My surprise was still greater in Caracas when I took a friend who had just arrived from Philadelphia to a little private dance. Noticing that the women were dancing with the greatest circumspection, Betty thought they did not know what was what and began to move her hips outrageously by way of demonstration. Soon all eyes were fastened on her, first with incredulity, then with disapproval. The longer they looked, the more she swayed. At last someone took me aside and said, in the tone with which one might ask a favor:

'Tell me, Olga, what kind of a person is this that you brought to the party? Is she respectable, or a dancer from some cabaret?'

'Why?' I asked. 'What has she done?'

'Haven't you noticed how she moves her hips and gets the men excited?'

At which point, another who was listening to our conversation remarked with something of the pride of a detective:

'Oh, well, she's foreign. That explains her.'

Only her being a foreigner saved Betty from being regarded as a nobody by these girls.

Some of the girls of our good families have studied classic dancing; many of them are remarkable performers, but however accomplished they may be, their skill is exhibited only to intimate friends or in the home. No respectable girl would dream of a theatrical career. Never! She, and her family, too, would be discredited. Occasionally they will show off their skill at benefits and charity performances, but that is all.

The last music played at any party is the *joropo*. Since that is the people's dance *par excellence*, playing it at a fashionable gathering is a concession to democracy. When someone says: 'I even danced the *joropo*!' he means he didn't miss a dance and stayed until the very end. Actually, that is not the correct thing to do. It is proper to come two hours late and leave before the party is over, in keeping with the well-known proverb, 'Of good things, not too much.'

Window Girl

LOVE IS THE SAME throughout the world, a hell when not requited and a paradise when mutual. Its outer manifestations, however, vary with the latitude.

Perhaps I have a heart of stone, but the first time I found myself confronted by a man in love — and in love with me — I was totally unmoved.

Our native houses have a vestibule and parlor with windows facing on the street, few or many according to the financial status of the tenant, and of great importance as a sort of barometer for the world at large and for lovers. These windows divulge many things about the people they belong to — wealth, character, habits. To speak of the woman in the house with the three windows or the one in that little house with the one small window is like submitting a statement or an inventory.

'That girl,' you exclaim, 'spends the whole day at the window,' and the inference is she's vain and lazy and gives no thought to household duties — a poor prospect, in short, for prospective suitors.

'The Gómezes,' you say, 'already have their window open, with the grandfather not yet two months dead.' Thereby you reprove them for their lack of feeling, for when there is mourning in the household, it is the custom to keep the windows closed for several months and refrain from playing the piano and other instruments.



'Juan Jiménez's divorced wife,' you whisper, 'is already at her window.' The lonely little woman is on the lookout for a successor to the departed Juan.

'Juanita X,' you state, 'was not at her window!' In other words, she has quarreled with her sweetheart.

Years ago, when our mothers and grandmothers were young, towns and cities were suddenly illumined, at twilight when the clocks struck five, by marriageable daughters appearing at their windows, dressed in their pretty clothes, their hair carefully combed, adorned with jewels and perfume, and full of hope and fancy. It was as if they were going on a visit. Faces peered out through the grilles in expectation of the man who would come walking down the street and by his mere presence make hearts beat a little faster. In the almost conventual isolation in which women lived, the window was the approach to a life of freedom, a vantage-point from which to view the outer world, and the day was spent eagerly awaiting the moment when it could be occupied. Easy enough it is to picture the prestige which attached to the men when they appeared in the twilight glow, embodiments of freedom, action, the world.

In the days before automobiles and pavements, suitors came in coaches and victorias and frequently on horseback.

I have often heard Mother say to Father jokingly:

'Had it not been for the white horse and the red carnation, I wouldn't have taken any notice of you.'

For Father, at the beginning of the century, with romantic locks, smart clothes, and a white horse, rode the streets of Caracas, casting devastating glances at the girls in their windows, until he captivated Mother.

This charming custom of courtship at the grilled window is disappearing in Caracas. Nowadays, in describing a girl who is somewhat awkward and old-fashioned, we say, 'Oh, she's a window girl!' In the small towns, on the other hand, the custom persists in all its glory, proving that the small-town girl knows it pays to advertise.

A window, perhaps adorned with potted plants in flower, with filmy lace curtains waving in the breeze, makes an ideal frame for feminine beauty. Add to that the parlor glimpsed beyond, with the finest possessions of the household on display, and the lights within which form a halo around the young lady's head, and you have a *mise en scène* that is hard to beat. A girl behind the grille, framed in lace curtains and softly lighted from behind, is a precious gem in a fine shop window. And since forbidden fruits are sweetest, there is the young man's knowledge, should further incentive be required, that in the background, guarding this jewel on display, lurks a whole police force embodied in the watchful eye of a maiden aunt or a mother, a little brother, or some old family servant.

But the window is not a public spot merely because it opens on the street. Only serious lovers may approach the grating. In other words, the youth who stands there on a number of consecutive occasions, half a dozen, let us say, is signing his death warrant — matrimony. He has established himself as a serious suitor. As such, after many afternoons and evenings at the window, he will at last be permitted to come inside. Thus he attains the rank of formal claimant to the hand of the young lady, and from that time on, instead of shifting from one foot to the other on the sidewalk, with every prospect of developing rheumatism in his old age, he is entitled to sit down. He sits in the embrasure, facing his sweetheart, and thereby announces his choice to passers-by and to the world at large.

A sour old man who died a bachelor used to tell his friends with glee:

'I never married — therefore I'm not rheumatic.'

We women who were listening paid no attention to him, but the men laughed.

The possibility of rheumatism would never have occurred to me, but I have asked myself a thousand times, 'What can they find to talk about through the grilles for hours on end

each day?' Yet that, perhaps, is not the basic mystery. When one really wants to talk, there is no lack of subjects. One can discuss Latin, horse-racing, friendship, politics, the high cost of living, sports, olives. Subjects there are aplenty. But how could it be possible to speak, let us say, of Hitler, shoe polish, ink, the rubber shortage, or Victor Mature in the fawning tones which window lovers use, while apparently consuming each other in delicious little sips? What do they say? I admire Lamartine and Rubén Darío; I adore Chopin; I even like graveyards and ruined castles, a proof of my romantic nature; but I am totally incapable of discussing tropical diseases or anything else to the accompaniment of sighs and rolling eyes. Once I had an opportunity to solve this mystery of what lovers talk about at windows, but my irreverent soul muffed the chance.

It is a custom of Venezuelan families to seek a change of scene, not at some fixed time of year, but whenever the spirit moves. One of my uncles once decided that his wife and daughters should spend a few months in the town of La Victoria. By a strange coincidence, at the very moment when he realized how very badly Auntie needed this vacation, a Spanish light-opera company with gay and pretty women in it was arriving in Caracas. A coincidence, of course. My family suggested that I should accompany my cousins; that, too, was a coincidence, and I went.

The town of La Victoria is a particularly delightful place. Its name commemorates a great victory of the patriots in the days of our war of independence. A strategic spot, occupied by Bolívar and other famous liberators, it was defended against the Spaniards who besieged it in the hope of forcing a surrender by starvation. Men and women held the enemy at bay, firing from barricades formed of their possessions. There was a magnificent skirmish over wardrobes, pianos, and the enormous beds with posts and canopies that were used in those days. When all was over, the people of La Victoria were minus their furniture, but they were free. Incidentally,

the town is also famous for the beauty of its women. Yes, indeed!

Aside from lofty historico-patriotic associations and some rural festivals and round-ups, the window was the only point of interest in La Victoria. It was a resource and a revelation. At it, from morning until night, I watched the life of the town. What a reputation I must have had for idleness! But I was not the only one.

A few days after I began to occupy my grilled observatory, as I was beginning to recognize the faces of the passers-by and to know just when the lines of donkeys loaded down with vegetables would come and the bus from mass or from Caracas, I noticed at the corner, near the policeman's post, a good-looking dark-complexioned boy standing in an attitude of waiting. He appeared there at approximately the same time that I did at the window. Sometimes he was even a little bit ahead of me. And never for a single moment did he stop staring toward our parlor, as if fascinated by something it contained. There being no cobra to play the rôle of hypnotist, I concluded that he was looking at some large and very unattractive yellow earthen jars belonging to my aunt.

From time to time, especially as the day grew warm, the fascinated blade would cross the street and be lost to view in the depths of a bar where fruit juices, soft drinks, and sparkling waters were not the only commodities available. After a while he would reappear, refreshed, attractive, and with his hair well combed. These goings and comings of the lad aroused my curiosity, and since the street was frequently deserted, I found myself watching him with interest. He seemed to be aware of that and to be pleased. The longer I looked at him, the longer he looked at the yellow jars. Could he by any chance be a collector of atrocities? Or was he an apprentice policeman?

One morning, as I took my place at the window a little later than usual, I found a bunch of carnations behind the grille. We Venezuelans are exceedingly fond of flowers.

'What a charming thought!' I cried, and I buried my face in their sweet petals. On the following day also I arrived late at my lookout, to find in the same spot two beautiful magnolia blossoms tied with a red ribbon. It was really like a prize for idleness. I decided immediately to arrive late every day, and every day I discovered a beautiful spray of sweet-smelling, dewy flowers, which found their way to the vases in the parlor or to my head of manufactured curls.

The dark young man took it all in from his corner, standing sometimes on his left foot, sometimes on his right, and now and then on both, reminding me somehow of the crane in the zoo at Maracay.

Early one Sunday, as I was coming out of church with my cousins and extended my hand toward the holy water font, my fingers met some others that were wet and warm. It was my apprentice policeman, who had heard mass just behind me and was now gallantly offering holy water, a custom which has come down through the centuries. Seeing him there, away from his customary spot, I gave a surprised start, which he must have interpreted very favorably.

From that moment of the holy water shared in common, he developed a need to greet me several times each day. It was not done from his station at the corner — that would have been ridiculous; but each time he visited the bar he made the circuit of the block and passed by my grilled window. At first I acknowledged his greetings with a condescending inclination of my head, quite within the bounds of proper feminine behavior. Soon, however, I was betting with myself how many times a day he would go into the bar, and that proved so diverting that I soon began to smile. Then it was that my collector, along with his sweeping bows, gave me a magnificent beaming smile as well. What beautiful teeth he had!

As time went on, in addition to bouquets, I found at my window boxes of bonbons and chocolates, books abominably written but beautifully bound, magazines, songbirds. One

afternoon it was a woolly black puppy with a ribbon bow on his neck and a card which read, 'For lovely Olga — her devoted slave.' It left me completely mystified. Was it the black puppy or the whimsical donor who was my devoted slave? It had not occurred to me to see any connection between the police apprentice and the presents; I simply accepted them as one of the many mysterious and delightful features of my Venezuela. I belong, anyway, to the class of people who believe in Santa Claus. Then, too, I thought perhaps they might all have come anonymously from another lad I had met at a rodeo, who had shown his interest in me in a particularly fervent manner.

Doubtless I should have persisted in my error had a sealed envelope not arrived one day with the inscription, 'Her Lovely Hands.' When I saw that, I realized right away that I should have to be more careful about enameling my nails. Sometimes, you know, the polish cracks at the ends; mine often does that.

Inside the envelope was one white sheet written in red ink. Faced with the inevitable, I trembled. It was poetry, poetry with rhyme, capitals, and everything. And I allergic to mediocre poets! On that single wretched page there was 'love' ten times at least, 'heart' five, 'cruelty' twice, 'ecstatic rapture' six, 'fatal beauty' eight, 'celestial' twice, 'angelic' once, and one 'torments of hell.' It was this last that sent me dashing to the inner patio to stick my head into the fountain and cool my fevered brain.

'So we've got as far as verses!' my cousins cried, and hummed Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March.'

'What else could she expect?' inquired a family friend who was spending the day with us. 'First she accepted José Luis's watching and his glances, then his flowers and birds, and finally the puppy. Naturally he had to send a declaration.'

With us, when a man first tells a woman of his love, he makes a 'declaration.' Considering the subsequent results, with the husband dictator of the house, it might better be

termed a 'declaration of the rights of man.' In France a declaration of that sort started a revolution; in Venezuela it only results in matrimony.

'Is he really serious?' I asked my cousins, pointing to the verses. 'Does this boy, José Luis, really mean what he says here?'

They would give me no answer until they had taken the paper from my hand and started to declaim the lines with dramatic intonations. Then they cried:

'How lovely! What feeling! The boy really is a poet — that is, unless he took it from a book. Even if he did, he showed good taste.'

The next morning, I confess quite frankly, I opened the window terrified lest I find another little envelope with rhymed atrocities instead of a bouquet. But José Luis apparently shared the local view which recommends one part lime and one of sand. In any case, that day there were roses and no verses. Perhaps someone had told him the story of the wet curls and the fountain; in a small town there is no concealing anything.

José Luis, who turned out to be well-educated and wealthy, surpassed himself on each new day as I watched him from my lookout.

Romantic that he was, he made an altar of my window, with offerings of flowers, sweets, and music, too. In country towns, as well as city suburbs, love-smitten swains serenade their ladies. At night, when all is still and everyone asleep, the guitars begin to twang and the gourds begin to rattle. If the suitor has a voice, he will sing his sweetest couplets; if not, he will ask his friends to sing for him or will hire a group of musicians who specialize in serenades. Sometimes for hours the night is filled with melody and love songs. In houses occupied by charming women there may be serenades seven nights a week, but the neighbors, strangely enough, do not complain.

José Luis had a splendid voice. The first night he serenaded

me I was so surprised that I jumped from bed and peeked through the shutter. The outline of two men with their guitars bathed in moonlight, the soft perfumed night, the narrow street rich in memories of our war of independence, the warm breeze from the plains, all united in a never-to-be-forgotten picture. Fascinated, I stood there in the darkened room, listening to the serenade in which I heard repeated with long-drawn notes the words:

Come to my poor little cabin,
Where you're missed when you are away.
Come, for a hammock awaits you. . . .

It was not the voice of José Luis, however, that I listened to, but the voice of my native land, passionate, ingenuous, romantic, spontaneous, intense, mysterious, and complex. To me it all seemed so beautiful that on the romantic impulse of the moment, since I could hardly show my pleasure by applause, I seized an orchid from a vase and dropped it through the shutter. It was merely an offering to the Muses, I assure you, but José Luis did not interpret it that way. For a woman to toss a flower in answer to a serenade is practically an acknowledgment of love. What a mess I was letting myself in for!

That flower was the least of my indiscretions. There was another vastly worse. Since my cousins were from Caracas which means freedom and sophistication as compared to small towns, they used to let their boy friends stand and chat with them outside the window with no thought of their being suitors. José Luis had had himself introduced to me by some friends we had in common. After that he stood outside the window and talked of a thousand different things — family, childhood, ranch life, the books he read, his ambitions and political ideas, his opinions of Venezuela and its government. The boy was interesting, and his conversation would have been even more so if he had not had that unfortunate habit of speaking in a low, mysterious voice and breathing his words in an affected manner rather than pronouncing them.

From my side of the grilled window I heard him vaguely and seemingly far away, for my window was rather high above the street. Sometimes I could not hear him and asked him to repeat:

‘What did you say? Tell me that again. I didn’t hear.’

This upset José Luis. There is nothing more annoying than having to repeat. Besides, my cousins and their friends, who were also at the window, would then begin to listen. Every time, moreover, that some woman or a group of people passed by on the sidewalk, José Luis had to step back from the window and interrupt our conversation; it is the first canon of masculine politeness to give a passing woman the inside of the walk.

One afternoon he had been telling me of the approaching fairs out on the plains. The sidewalk had become extremely crowded. Any number of women with their black head-dresses were coming from a near-by church. So continuous were the interruptions, the bows, and greetings, that unthinkingly I said:

‘Listen, José Luis, this is as uncomfortable for you as it is for me, craning your neck while I am bending over. Why don’t you come in? Then we can talk on the same level.’

This time it was José Luis, unable to believe his ears, who asked:

‘What was that you said? Tell me again. I didn’t hear you.’

As I repeated it, my cousins began to clear their throats and make queer noises.

When José Luis appeared inside the parlor, my aunt, not without considerable surprise, greeted him and pointed to a chair that was the most ridiculous piece of furniture in the whole house, more so, in fact, than the awful yellow jars. It was a chair with two seats facing the same way and separated by a kind of wooden barrier, an old-fashioned love-seat. It was in just such a horrible contrivance that our grandmothers absorbed the protestations of their suitors’ love.

'Don't you like this chair?' he asked me, using for the first time the familiar *tú*, which in itself was sufficiently surprising.

Before I could reply, words spoken by a friendly neighbor reached me through the window:

'Aha! How did José Luis get there? What about inviting me to the wedding party?'

The love-seat, José Luis's familiar *tú*, the neighbor's words, my cousins' jokes, everything seemed to strike me at once with a devastating impact. With no thought of what I was about, I had accepted José Luis Mayoral as my acknowledged suitor.

La Victoria, with its memories of the war of independence, its narrow streets, its dogs, its flowers, and all the rest, was crashing on my shoulders. Much the same thing must have happened to those who witnessed the 1900 earthquake which buried many cities. And it was this very moment, when my head felt as big as the yellow earthen jars, which José Luis seized by some strange impulse to ask me in his sweet and gentle voice:

'Tell me, my little one, with whom would you prefer to have the interview, my father or me?'

'What a pointless question,' I thought, 'to ask just at this moment!' As far as I was concerned, José Luis's father was a being almost mythological, with a black mustache and a watch and chain. Why should the good man want to call on me?

'I do not know your father,' I replied, 'and somehow can't picture him seated in that chair. So if I really have to choose, I'd rather it were you.'

That was the end of my 'change of scene' in La Victoria. The same night I escaped from José Luis and all the neighbors in an automobile which devoured the miles. Home at last in Caracas, I heaved a great sigh of relief. At that period of my life I had not learned that one must always have the courage of his convictions and that only cowards flee responsibility.

Admitting a young man to the house is a serious affair. It

is equivalent to signing a binding contract or agreement or saying almost in as many words:

'I'm ready to marry you whenever you desire, to be the mother of the children you may wish to have, to bestow my love upon you and be the faithful companion of your good and evil times, to obey you, and to breakfast with you until the end of my days, or your own.'

A young man admitted to the house is at liberty to voice opinions on any family matters that involve his fiancée. He can also expect her to obey his wishes in the small details so important to a woman — the style and color of her clothes, her make-up, her hairdo, hairdresser, friends, habits. A single girl may be blond and thin today and a bulging brunette after her engagement — all the work and whim of her betrothed. A friend of mine of the glamour girl type, whom I once encountered thus transformed, explained:

'I'm no longer using rouge because my boy friend doesn't like it, and I've let my hair grow out because he likes it long. I don't attend mass at eleven because he doesn't want me to, and instead of reading Dumas, it's now his favorite author, Marcel Proust.'

I somehow lacked the courage to ask her if she still called herself Concha or if she had changed her Christian name as well.

A man is also entitled to kiss his fiancée if she is willing. I remember Altagracia's first kiss. One evening Ramiro came to call. Mother, Father, and Héctor had gone to the opera, and Altagracia and I were left alone. As Mother was leaving, she said to me:

'You realize I do not want you to leave Altagracia alone with Ramiro while you are reading up in your room, or gazing at the moon from the terrace, or talking for hours on the telephone, or any of the other queer things you do. As far as I am concerned, Altagracia may be alone with anyone, because she is an entirely responsible young lady, but if someone came to call and found them together it would cause talk.'

'A caller such as Aunt Isabel, for instance,' I added with a grin.

'Don't be catty, my child,' said Mother with a laugh as she went to hunt up Altagracia to tell her the same thing I had heard, but with regard to me. At that time Ramiro had not made up his mind yet as to whether he wanted to propose to Altagracia or to me.

Ramiro, Altagracia, and I sat in the gallery with the willow furniture. We made several starts at conversation, but none of them led anywhere. There was a sort of subtle tension in the air. I had a very definite impression that we were one too many — but which one?

'Let's go out to the garden,' I suggested. 'There's a moon that we shouldn't miss.'

We headed for the music pavilion. Our place is full of architectural whimsies like that. The garden was sweet with the scent of a *dama de noche* which enjoys only a few hours of life, opening after dark and dying as dawn is breaking.

The telephone rang. I went to answer it. It was Aunt Isabel, asking what the correct time was. All the clocks in her house had stopped the day before, and she had just got around to winding them. Telephones! Clocks! What horrid ideas inventors do have!

As I returned to the garden, I saw against the moon a single compound silhouette. Altagracia and Ramiro were kissing for all the world as if they were in a Hollywood movie. If it had been a film, I should have been tempted to applaud, but in the garden, with the moonlight, the flowers, and the mountains beyond the rooftops, it seemed better not to. I stole back to the telephone and came out again, with the air of the cat who ate the canary calling to the heroine of the pavilion:

'Altagracia, that was Aunt Isabel who phoned. She got us mixed up with the cathedral belfry.'

Cousin Altagracia told me nothing that night, but I felt sure there was to be a wedding. No one with her old-fash-

ioned ideas of love-making would ever allow a man to kiss her unless he were her heart's desire, the chosen one to lead her to the altar. As for Ramiro, he has made no official statement, either; but we have heard that he announced to his most intimate friend:

'I've decided to cut the queue soon.'

To a bullfighter 'cutting the queue' means literally what it says — to cut off the braided lock of hair worn at the back. Doing this indicates his retirement from the ring. In the case of a good-looking man adored by women, it means giving up amorous escapades for marriage.

The suitor with the freedom of the house likewise has his obligations. He must bring presents to his fiancée and flowers to his future mother-in-law, talk politics with the old man of the household, supply candy for the children, and take his fiancée out walking and to dances and the movies, along with two or more members of the family, for a girl who thinks of her reputation will never attend a dance or movies with her affianced husband only.

The most picturesque of all the duties of an accepted suitor are the obligatory calls. Every evening of the week the young man spends several hours at his sweetheart's house — with her and her family, for not even in the parlor, on the sofa or the love-seat, can the poor couple enjoy a bit of freedom. Convention demands that they never be alone, and so one member of the family is always sacrificed to take his turn at the delicate job of 'minding the cap.'

Sometimes it is the grandfather who mounts guard. Though he is equipped with spectacles and buried in his paper, the paper is quickly lowered, if the sound of conversation ceases, and he looks around. Or the watchman may be one of the maiden aunts; they are almost always specialists in the field. Supplied with knitting or embroidery, the aunt is very busy until fatigue and boredom cause her head to nod. A prudent woman, she will occupy the corner farthest from the couple and, if possible, turn her back upon them, but only as long as

they converse. As soon as she is aware that they are silent, throat-clearing is in order.

Almost always the individuals chosen to mind the cap are the less important members of the household — aunts, grandparents, little brothers, women friends, even an old servant. Seldom does it fall to the mother or the father. When the latter appears upon the scene, an interesting discussion with the young man ensues and the fiancée is generally forgotten. A young lady in the country was devoting her Monday evenings to long telephone visits with her girl friends. When she was asked if it were not time for her fiancé to come, she answered: 'Oh, yes, he's here. But he is calling on Papa.'

Standing guard over engaged couples is extremely boring and is generally accompanied by yawns, nods, and watch-inspection. The grandfather of a friend of mine, a very genial soul, succeeded in combining the requirements of convention with those of common sense by facing the couple in a comfortable armchair, covering his head with his paper, and going to sleep. When at last his grandchild married, he had the impudence to say that those hours of her courtship had given him his most delightful dreams.

However, it isn't always the guardians who sleep. Young men also have bad habits. One such was the husband of the aunt I visited in La Victoria. Hot-headed and a lady-killer, before his marriage he lived in a constant flurry of dancing, singing, taking airings in his carriage, and making love to hare-brained women. He worked by day and caroused by night, beginning when the cathedral clock struck twelve. Obviously the silence and decorum of Auntie's parlor, her gentle nature, and the example of the cap-minder could only provoke sleep. His two- or three-hour call was spent in yawning. One night he fell sound asleep. My dear, kind aunt secured a pillow, the work of her own needle, placed it gently beneath her beloved's head, and tiptoed from the room.

'Poor Pepe!' she exclaimed. 'He is so tired out from work that he has dropped off.'

But he was never caught sleeping in the wings during a musical comedy performance.

With all these dreadful things in mind, it was only natural for me to flee La Victoria and José Luis. It was ordained, however, that all my acts should be misunderstood. My flight he took as evidence of my love and modesty. A few days after my return to Caracas, a letter came from La Victoria for Father, the paper very elegant, the handwriting very masculine and cultivated. Fortunately it was in prose — formal, circumspect, conventional, measured prose. He solicited my hand. The postscript was what worried me most. In it José Luis announced his arrival in Caracas, where he would call on us the following afternoon at four o'clock.

He came.

On the dot of four we saw him descending from a car. He was looking a little pale and worried, but those details I overlooked entirely. I was too busy taking in his costume. It was José Luis in formal garb with all the time-honored and pitiful conventions — cutaway, black shoes, boutonnière, white gloves, and a top hat, all at four o'clock of a stifling afternoon.

He was ushered into the drawing-room. Soon Father appeared, and they shook hands. For some time they discussed incidents of a deer hunt on the Mayoral estate. Eventually a sympathetic understanding was established, and José Luis, now very serious, stated the purpose of his call. Father couldn't have thought he had come in top hat and cutaway at four in the afternoon to talk of deer.

'As you, sir, must doubtless know by now,' he said, 'I love your daughter and have come to ask her hand.'

Father seemed about to interrupt, but José Luis continued modestly:

'I'm not as rich as she deserves, but I own a farm.'

'Among respectable people,' Father told him, 'financial details are a secondary matter. Simón Bolívar died in a borrowed shirt. It is the individual who counts. But you are

soliciting my daughter's hand, not mine. She is the one for you to reach an understanding with. Talk first with her, and I will see you later. Whatever may be the outcome of the conversation, let me assure you that I'm very glad to know you, and remember me to your father, who is a good friend of mine.'

Father shook José Luis's hand and left the room. He found me waiting in the gallery, patted me on the back, pointed to the drawing-room, and whispered:

'God help you!'

I surely needed someone's help. . . .

I did not marry José Luis. He is intelligent, cultivated, and attractive; he has a good voice, good manners, and good principles; he is respectable, one of the few men who look well in a topper. All highly essential qualifications. But in countries where divorce is still unusual and to be avoided at the cost of almost any personal sacrifice, a woman must be very careful before she takes the serious step of matrimony. To find yourself bound by an agreement for all eternity with a man who has been seen only through a window grating during a 'change of scene' in a country town would be no joke.

God, Saints, and Husbands

IF THE UNITED STATES is woman's paradise, so is Venezuela man's, especially the married man's.

The Venezuelan woman is a devout and pious Catholic. More than ever in times of threatened world collapse, she feels the compulsion to believe. As a result, she has acquired a variety of convictions of intensity and strength. Her religious faith is boundless, gentle, solid, and consoling. In times of grief and trial she seeks refuge in the thought of God and finds hope and comfort in it. Endowed with evangelical patience, she suffers with a mystic stoicism. Deep within her is the assurance that God will take care of everything, if not in this world, in the one to come, where He will reward her with eternal life. That, perhaps, is why she is able to endure the hardships of the present with such fortitude.

Besides the idea of divinity, profound and mysterious, she has a great range of deep-rooted, sound convictions. This is especially evident among uneducated women and those of rural districts, but it is also true of the more enlightened, although it is tending now to weaken and disappear.

She has, for example, complete faith in every saint in heaven. Her regard, to be sure, is not equally great for all. No one would think of comparing her fervor for Saint Anthony, one of the most popular, with that which she might profess for Saint Anacleto, whom practically no one has ever

heard of. Obviously not. Her faith is always complete, but its intensity is nicely proportioned to the number of recognized miracles the saint has worked. Should it happen that a believer praying to Saint Francis finds him deaf, she will try Saint Andrew or Saint Lucy. She has not lost faith, but she likes her faith to be efficacious.

Miracles performed by the saints who are invoked in prayer are known throughout the country, like the skill of some great doctor. In any group of pious old gossips conversations like the following can be heard:

'Saint Engracia has just worked a wonderful miracle for Carmen Pérez. Would you believe that . . .'

'You don't say so! They worked a better one than that for Teresa González in Macuto. I, too, have a little holy image that grants me everything I ask.'

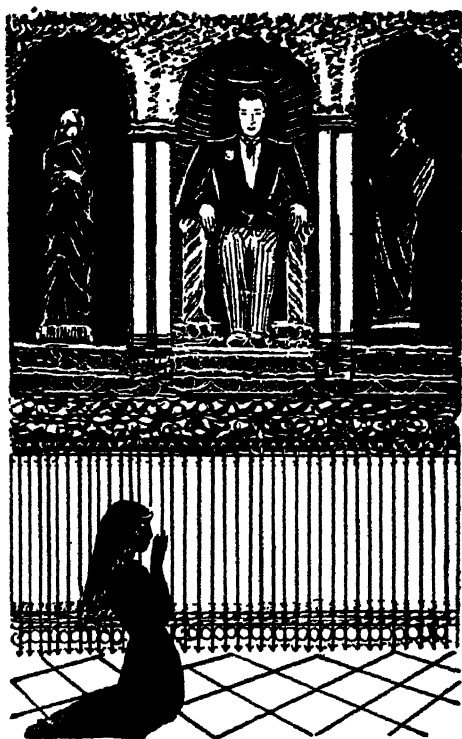
'What is the name? I never heard you mention this image before. Won't you give me a copy of the prayer you use? I would like to see if it will work as well for me.'

Frequently, too, you can hear a woman full of piety asking her friend:

'Do you happen to know any saint who is good for neuralgia?'

'I can't think of one for neuralgia, but why don't you try Saint Nicasia? She has become pretty good at miracles. Would you believe it! I put the fifth part of a lottery ticket at the foot of her image and won ten bolívares.'

Little do unbelievers know what they miss by not possessing good-natured, placid faith like this. It solves all life's problems. Any ignorant Venezuelan woman knows there are saints who specialize in every human ill. Saints for catarrh, saints for headache, saints for the pains of childbirth, saints for servant trouble, swellings, drunkenness, falling hair, lost fortunes, lightning, evil words, strokes, eyesore, fire, shipwreck and earthquakes, gray hair and wrinkles, rheumatism and rising rivers, wild bulls and bronchitis, loss of life, the coffee pest, automobile collisions, train wrecks, snakebite,



cuts, infections, and skin blemishes. Saints, in fact, for absolutely all purposes.

The believer carries a universal insurance policy against every contingency of injury or accident. Every risk is covered, even the infidelity of Venezuelan husbands, which no one bothers to pray about.

Lottery tickets at the feet of saints, rosaries worn around the neck, scapulars in wallets and vice versa, little household altars, burning candles, fasting, promises, prayers, all these are part of the everyday existence of the simple Venezuelan people.

In every Venezuelan house, in every hut — the custom holds for all social classes — there is a little altar with religious images or pictures. On it stand the favorite saints, adorned with flowers and greenery. On days of prayer, days when it is hoped a favor will be granted, a candle or a lamp burns on the altar, and while it burns a gentle faith is kindled in the soul and a little gleam of hope shines forth.

This altar light has an almost symbolic value. Many times I remember hearing Mother tell one of the servants:

'So-and-So, light a candle to the Heart of Jesus and see if He will get me out of this mess!'

Whenever Father was about to undertake an important business deal, whenever my brother or I had examinations coming on at school, Mother would have a candle lighted on the household altar. There is no doubt that Father and Héctor, like me, thinking of the light burning for our sake, felt better and more confident. More than anything else, the little lamp, in my own case, seemed to represent mother love watching over me.

Once I heard a woman whom I had always thought very well read and advanced saying to her daughter:

'Conchita, we are going to ask Saint Thomas to cure your catarrh.'

The remark, coming from her, was so astonishing that I took her aside and asked if she really meant it.

'Look here, my dear,' she replied, with that charming forbearance which older women show when speaking to the young, 'it is not that I believe Saint Thomas is disposed to bother with little girls' catarrh. But little girls, they are made to give thought to Saint Thomas. In Conchita's case there is nothing the matter but nervousness. When she thinks someone in heaven has her case in mind, she will feel better at once. Everything in this world, my child, depends on the faith you put in it.'

Beside this tranquil, artless, candid world of women stands the skeptical, unbelieving, positivistic world of men. Respectable Venezuelan men in general are complete unbelievers. As they grow up they cast off the unquestioning faith which their mothers implanted in their childish hearts, just as they put aside short pants and sailor caps. The gradual destruction of their faith began at school and was completed with their exposure to encyclopedias, rationalistic books, and café conversations.

When a bachelor goes to mass it is conclusive proof that he is in love. In the case of a married man, the chances are a hundred to one that he is in dire trouble with his wife and in need of her forgiveness.

Every girl asks her suitor, as real evidence of his devotion, to accompany her to mass. That is the great test. In the face of the general masculine irreverence, women develop missionary souls and seek to convert the men who come into their lives. By hanging a tiny religious medal around their necks or making them go to mass, they believe they have headed them toward salvation. The men humor them, go to church, wear the medal, cease to quote pagan philosophers or tell stories about monks — until their wedding day. From that time on, any concession to religious observance is definitely out. Once more the couple go their separate ways, or rather, the man returns to his old habits, the woman having made no change in hers. The missionary spirit will always be

latent in the woman, who throughout her life will renew her apostolic efforts from time to time.

'Tomorrow is my saint's day,' you will hear her say. 'How I wish we might attend mass together!'

'Monday was our wedding anniversary, and I prayed to God that you would go to church with me.'

'Last night I dreamed that we were on our way to Saint Joseph's chapel, both of us. . . .'

In the somewhat anomalous situation that results from their divergent points of view, it must be admitted that the husband shows remarkable tact. Both usually endeavor to avoid the subject of religion. Neither wishes to tread on the other's ground, save in the case of the wife's harmless hints and the little jokes the husband makes now and then. There was, for example, the clerk who, arriving home at lunchtime, announced to his dark, pallid, but devout little wife:

'See here, Rosalía, you'd better begin talking to Saint Onofre. I've been fired, and we're not going to have the where-withal to go to market.'

A married man, discussing his sister-in-law, said to his wife:

'The trouble is, my dear, that your sister has no standing with Saint Anthony. She will remain a spinster all her days.'

Saint Anthony is most efficient in finding suitors for marriageable girls.

But in addition to Saint Onofre, Saint Anthony, and all the othersaints in heaven, scapulars, household altars, and novenas, women have another god, another religion — their husbands.

Excessively feminine, they believe in women's weakness, and for contrast, by a law of nature, they seek the strength of man. They have been brought up in the cult of man, his fortitude, his wisdom, his omnipotence. From childhood they have been steeped in the notion of their own weakness, their delicacy, their incapacity, their lack of education. These failings have not been pointed out to them to be corrected or overcome, but in order that, being conscious of their inferior-

ity, they may not aspire to a position beyond their grasp. For this state of things there is really no one to blame, and the younger generation is changing all that. Woman's incapacity was a tradition handed down from generation to generation from the remote days of the first Spanish settlers. It is an evil to be deplored in the name of all.

In days gone by a mother, thinking back over her own life, would tell her daughters:

'Woman is weak and helpless and must look to man for support and guidance.'

She should have said:

'Woman has been brought up to be weak and helpless. She must change this weakness into strength and prepare to defend herself in a changing world, to face its responsibilities consciously and wisely, and to develop discernment to guide her and the generations that will come after her.'

Often I used to hear Doña Mariana X, a lady of dusty mind and lineage, counseling her grandchildren:

'Children! Children! Go do your chores and prepare yourselves for life. You, Margarita, to the piano; you, Adelaida, make the dessert; you, Violeta, finish your embroidery; and you, María Teresa, get out the dress you are going to wear when you appear at the window. Never mind your books and your arithmetic. A woman with your accomplishments has plenty with which to attract a good husband. That alone is indispensable. With a good husband you have no cause to worry. He will guide you.'

But in spite of Doña Mariana's counsel it must be said that Margarita has now received her bachelor's degree, Adelaida is acquiring a doctorate in chemistry, and Violeta is captain of a basketball team.

'A good husband to guide you' is a phrase heard very often by every Venezuelan girl from the day when she is presented socially. As if she were a lost sheep, a racing car, or a blind man.

Lacking all means of analysis and comparison, how could

our women know if the husband who offered himself was good — a shepherd, a leader, and a guide? Why all these props, moreover, instead of standing on their own feet and seeing with their own eyes?

Until some few years ago, when certain reforms were introduced, the law substantiated this false training, encouraged this mistaken point of view, put its faith in the voice of the past, many of whose ideas are valueless today, and kept woman beyond the reach of universal evolution. The Venezuelan Civil Code counted woman as a minor. It granted her practically no rights, not even the management of her own property. Her every public act required the sanction of her husband. An article of the Civil Code now stipulates that 'Each spouse has the free administration and disposition of his or her own property.'

This long-standing state of affairs kept more than two million women from sharing in the cultural and social progress of the world and gave rise to the feminine cult of the male as lord and master.

The words of the parish priest, speaking from his pulpit in the name of God, or of the husband, speaking for himself at home, at the movies, on the telephone, or during an outing in the country, admit no shadow of a doubt. The words of both are revered, accepted without question, let alone discussion.

Woman has been trained to find good in every word her husband utters, whether it concerns a new hat, pillows for the living-room, rice and milk, the openings in the sprinkler, or the Russo-Nazi war. The good wife will listen to his views, his criticisms, his commendation, his reproaches, or his indifference as if to the oracle of Delphi. She has formed the habit of thinking that her husband is always right. If he is vague, confused, or unintelligible, she will tell herself that his words are very eloquent, high up in the twentieth story of the mind. If he is absurd, dull, and stupid, her native judgment and intuition will enable her to sense it, but for a long

time her mind will refuse to admit that the blessed husband can be mistaken.

As in many other religions, there are certain articles of faith which the devout do not readily accept without promises and explanations. In this case they have to do with marital fidelity. Here woman is hard to persuade and can even be driven to apostasy. But this is a large and separate subject.

Frequently, a lecturer who is addressing a sympathetic audience does not bother to present a complete analysis of his thoughts. He knows the applause will come in any case. Similarly, the husband allows himself to be swayed at times by a dangerous nonchalance. He will keep his serious ideas for discussion outside and will unload his foolishness at home.

Out on the plains of Venezuela they tell a story to the point. In a certain village the sweeper in the office of the local magistrate set up a claim to wisdom among his fellow townsmen. One day, seeing two farmers approaching, he slipped on his glasses and picked up a magazine that had arrived two months before by muleback from Caracas. One of the farmers spoke to him. Receiving no reply, the man repeated his question in a louder tone.

'Don't bother me!' thundered the angry sweeper. 'Can't you see I'm reading?'

At these words the farmer, who really knew how to read, roared with laughter and called his friend's attention to the fact that the man of wisdom was holding the magazine upside down.

The latter, quite unmoved, looked up.

'Perhaps you are not aware of it, my friend,' he said, 'but those in authority read a magazine either way up they choose.'

In Venezuela the husband is in authority, and life is his magazine. He may read it any way up he chooses, and the farmers must keep quiet. To be sure, intelligent and cultivated husbands of whatever generation have not demanded unconditional submission and admiration from their wives. On the contrary, they have exerted every effort to help them

rise above their ignorance and assume the rôle of intellectual companion.

The unprogressive and unenlightened man is naturally opposed to the progress, education, and independence of woman. Perhaps he fears she may overtake and pass him. As a matter of fact, something of the sort really is happening.

A vain and empty-headed fellow, who had been chatting with some young women of the new order, later remarked:

'These modern girls are very tiresome. You have to watch everything you say, for they are always analyzing words and meanings. You're not even safe in talking nonsense as you were with women in the old days. They are always sizing you up. The more ignorant the wife, the happier the husband. In my house I want to be the one to do the talking.'

Obviously this sort of man, found not only in Venezuela, but even in the United States and in Siam, will be responsible if the Venezuelan woman's cult of man collapses. Anyone would be an iconoclast whose idols talked like that!

His Majesty Man

RAMIRO CASONA is rich, refined, good-looking. Under those conditions any man can aspire to the hand of any woman anywhere throughout the world.

When he began coming often to our house on the pretext of playing bridge, inviting Altagracia and me out with his mother and his sister, dancing only with us at all the parties, and sending books and flowers, I knew that he was angling for a 'yes.' But I couldn't tell whether it was Altagracia's or mine.

As a bridge or dancing partner, a companion on our outings, an opponent in arguments of any kind, and as a friend, Ramiro Casona was splendid — well-nigh perfect. He had all the qualities of a well-born Venezuelan. He was cultivated, intelligent, and a gentleman, courageous, highly refined, sensitive, discriminating, elegant, discreet, generous, and a hundred per cent respectable, with the Latin's sparkle and ready understanding. He was a treasure of a man, six feet two inches tall, with black eyes, brown hair, and a London tailor. And as if all that were not enough, his treatment of us was marked by that consideration and engaging gallantry which our well-bred men display toward women.

When he walked along the street, girls would drop their handkerchiefs and strike an attitude in an attempt to catch his eye. Even Altagracia, the lofty Altagracia, let her glances rest on him when she thought no one was watching. My



vanity, too, was highly flattered by the part I was assigned, and yet, in spite of all his splendid qualities, Ramiro Casona frightened me. The mere fact of being Venezuelan meant that he had the Latin attitude toward women; he thought them very lovely, estimable, and sentimental, and hence deserving of his love. He was a man, moreover, who practiced his convictions, with the result that there was not a woman in Caracas or its suburbs who might not become the victim of his admiration.

'Even the plainest women,' he used to tell us, 'have a charm about them.'

When we danced together, he would smile over my head at other women. He did the same with Altagracia.

Once when I commented on his popularity, he answered with these disarming but disconcerting words:

'Woman being, as she is, the quintessence of femininity, one does homage to each one by admiring all the others.'

That hieroglyphic meant more or less this: Woman is such a wonderful and ideal thing that a man would seem failing in his appreciation of her virtues if he did not know how to recognize them and show her individually that he did so.

It was just this boundless and unrestricted admiration of women that made me fear Ramiro. Such popularity was a habit which could not be broken overnight. Far from it. It had an atavistic origin. All the men throughout his family had been noted for their great gallantry. From my own point of view, it held no promise of a happy future.

'Would you marry Ramiro?' I asked Altagracia one day.

She promptly blushed and answered:

'Yes, if he should ask me. And you?'

'Well, I don't know. I doubt it. Have you noticed how fond he is of women? He has all the good qualities, but he loses his head at the sight of a pretty woman.'

To which Altagracia, who unquestionably knows her classics better than I, replied:

'What man isn't fond of women? They all are — almost

all, at least.' She added hopefully, 'Perhaps after marriage he'll improve.'

'He'll improve all right,' I told her, 'but in the opposite direction. The woman who marries him must be prepared merely to look on at dances or dance with her old friends while he flirts with all the other women. She will remain comfortably at home here in Caracas while he goes to North America or Europe on a married man's vacation. You know well enough that a wife must even, sometimes, resign herself to the fact that an attractive man will have one or more households apart from the legitimate and will feel himself entirely free, with no one to account to for his acts. Do you like all that?'

As Altagracia and I were talking thus, I realized that actually we were championing two totally different standards, two distinct attitudes toward married life, hers the old, conservative, and reactionary, which the Venezuelans call the Gothic, and mine the liberal, new, and revolutionary.

'No,' she answered, 'I do not like it, but the evil is an ancient one and has its source in our history and social structure. I can't struggle against that state of things alone. Our ancestors lived that way, and they were happy. Why can't we do the same? The infidelity of Venezuelan men has many causes — the ardor of the Latin races, the South American especially; the climate, and their whole mode of life. Don't forget, besides, that they are descendants of the conquistadores, with everything complex and marvelous that the word conveys.'

When she said that, I knew Altagracia was hopelessly in love. She had gone back to the conquistadores to find excuses for a husband's future and still merely potential infidelities. How wonderful love is! Yet so far as the conquistadores and history are concerned, she was not talking nonsense. Quite the contrary.

Back at the end of the fifteenth century, in 1492, to be exact, three tiny caravels were set afloat by the determination of an intelligent queen who sold her jewels to secure the money for

the undertaking. The expedition was to discover a new world, and an enlightened man named Christopher Columbus led it. With him and those who followed came the Spaniards, men both good and bad, but possessing certain qualities in common — boundless courage, an extraordinary thirst for adventure, a desire for fame and world dominion. Each one was a believer. They were to struggle against nature, against the great unknown, and men. They were to die of hunger, thirst, pestilence, the bites of strange insects, the attacks of wild beasts, poisoned arrows, shipwreck, heat, and cold. They were to achieve a degree of suffering, courage, and tenacity that almost surpassed human limits and bordered on the fanciful. They were to work their way through virgin jungle, across deserts and raging torrents, without shelter, medicine, guides, or means of transportation, gnawing on hides at times or appeasing their hunger with snakes, toads, bark, roots, and leaves, and traveling for years on end without finding a single hospitable refuge. Their will transcended merely human factors.

Such were our ancestors, the discoverers and conquerors of America. So far everything is epic, supernatural, but with the conquest once accomplished human weakness appeared. In conquered countries women are always spoils of war, and he who can secure three is not going to be content with one.

Once established in America, with honors and property secure or still living in hope of them, the conquistador felt the longing for a white woman, a companion of his kind. He went himself to get her or asked his friends to bring her out from Spain. When this companion came, when an honorable and legitimate household was established, the illegitimate wives and children still clamored for their rights of blood and love. Thus, besides the family which bore the name and arms of the conquistador, a humble family or families of mixed blood, obscure ancestry, and misfortune grew.

Each wife, legitimate or otherwise, exerted every effort to attract and keep her husband constantly with her. She flat-

tered, lured, admired, loved, and obeyed him, lest he desert her for some rival. The idol of numerous altars, his slightest whims obeyed as orders, his orders as verdicts, the man became convinced of his own infallibility and sovereignty.

Throughout the colonial period of Spanish rule in South America, the situation remained unchanged, or, if anything, it was heightened by the existence of slavery. Young and handsome slave girls were held to be proper objects of their owners' pleasure. The Venezuelan Indian himself, moreover, was polygamous. Then came the wars of independence and the horrible civil wars. The women of the people, numerous and defenseless, continued to be spoils of war, and the male element, now reduced in numbers, placed a still higher value on itself. The situation of the conquest was repeated. In addition to legitimate households, many secret households flourished. In modern times there is no longer any excuse for familial-sexual multiplicity, but the precedent exists, and the custom is deeply rooted. The white man, descendant of the conquistadores, continues to see in the woman of the people something that is at his disposal. The women of the secret households are generally not women who could aspire to be legitimate wives. They belong to a lower level, if such it may be called. Legitimate marriages, it may be added, are rare between people of different social degree.

Paradoxical as it may seem, man's infidelity rests on the rigorous training of the woman of the upper classes, her exemplary honesty, her confined and sheltered life, her highly developed respect for self and the conventions of society, her modesty, and her inaccessibility. Only through matrimony can a man have access to a woman of the upper classes, and once married she is still more unapproachable to all but her husband.

Such is the historico-social explanation of the recognized infidelity of Venezuelan husbands and the lady-killing propensities of bachelors. Add to that the vanity of knowing oneself pursued, spoiled, and fought for by numerous women.

The outcome may not be pleasant, but it is perhaps not unnatural. As Christ defending a sinner said, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.' Or, to quote a popular and unknown sage on the same theme, 'People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.' I defend nothing and no one, but many people are more or less in the same boat.

With such a background the Venezuelan man has developed an elaborate art of love-making. In less than fifteen minutes he will tell a woman the sweetest, most poetic, spiritual, and enchanting things she has ever heard. He can make any woman feel herself queen of the universe. He will tell her lies, or truths of the passing moment, in a manner so convincing that she must believe them and be happy. A woman who has never been made love to by a Venezuelan 'technician' does not know what she has missed.

A young Venezuelan in New York worked amorous havoc among the girls, all the more because they were gullible enough to take everything he said as gospel. At home we know the type, see him in his proper light, and discount him at least a little. One of these lovestruck girls was weeping on the Grace Line dock as she watched the steamer bear her swain away.

'There's no one like him,' she sobbed, 'to call me *sabrosita*' — 'my savory little one,' that is.

Sabrosita is not the only thing men say when making love to women. Their vocabulary is very wide and adequate to all occasions. Under the head of compliments or bouquets are the phrases used on the street, addressed to a pretty woman as she passes.

The girl who walks along displaying a new dress or showing off a hat has only to go a block or two to know it is a success. A passing man may exclaim with admiration:

'You're so beautiful in that green dress, I've become a vegetarian.'

Or perhaps:

'You're so lovely today that you have caused your own hat to bloom.'

One day near Plaza Bolívar I heard a lad tell a girl with huge black eyes:

'Child, those eyes of yours are like the new motor buses. The lives of us poor pedestrians hang by a thread.'

To a woman whose beauty would inspire painters, a man will say:

'The police are seeking you to return you to the gallery you escaped from.'

If they are not completely ugly, Caracas girls who stroll through San Francisco Street and those along Plaza Bolívar will hear:

'Three cheers for your mother!'

The idea is that the mother is responsible for her daughter's grace and beauty.

A college friend of mine, with long thick lashes, heard someone say at the corner of San Francisco Street:

'With lashes like those, you'll never need a fan.'

A little farther on, a lad with long, romantic locks exclaimed, with a sigh to soften stones:

'Princess, if I were a millionaire, I'd ask you to marry me this minute.'

The corner of San Francisco Street is where the various brokers and commission merchants gather, a sort of outdoor stock exchange. There every manner of transaction is discussed and negotiated, from the sale of a ring for a hundred bolívars to the purchase of a flying field, a building several stories high, or five thousand dairy cows. Facing this street with the agreeable shade of its hundred-year-old trees is the Capitol with its beautiful romantic gardens; on one side is the old San Francisco church, where the Act of Independence was signed in 1811, and the university with its inspiring courtyards and happy students.

Any woman who passes through these precincts without receiving half a dozen compliments can be certain, if she is

single, that her destiny is to 'dress saints,' the occupation appropriate to confirmed old maids. If she is married, on the other hand, she will do well to look for a new formula for holding her husband's love. Compliments are the thermometer of feminine beauty, charm, and youth.

The insight of the gallants on San Francisco Street is such that they can spot the beautiful feature, the outstanding detail, the hidden quality, at once.

They will tell a woman with lovely arms:

'It was you who stole the arms from that poor Venus.'

A wit remarked to a girl who was wearing a dress with conspicuous black and white stripes like prison garb:

'Give me the number of your cell and I'll bring a bunch of flowers.'

To a sultry brunette, men will say as they step aside to let her pass:

'What a blitzkrieg!'

While as she crosses the street and walks on by the university, she will hear:

'Here comes a high explosive with the secret weapon of the war.'

In the market district:

'What a woman! Heavens above! She's pure pepper!'

Those blessed with less imagination will compare woman to the flowers:

'You are like a pure white lily.'

'Your skin is like a rose.'

'You are as modest and lovely as the violets.'

'Take care, my tuberoses, lest the bees devour you.'

People in practical countries, the United States, for instance, will ask the purpose of this prodigality of witticisms, similes, and words. Purpose? There is none. The man who compliments a woman has no definite intention, no fixed aim, no hope of getting anywhere. He does not expect the recipient to recognize him, speak, or even smile. He expects nothing. He is totally disinterested. He merely feels a desire to

express his thoughts aloud, and so he does. It is an anonymous and spontaneous way to show admiration for a woman, a graceful and inoffensive Latin gallantry.

Perhaps this custom explains why Venezuelan women are so careful of their dress when they appear on the street. The knowledge that in passing they attract the attention of men does much more for female vanity than the gray anonymity of big cities where no one looks at anybody else. Wearing a new hat in New York, knowing that no one will notice it, is quite different from displaying it in Caracas, where every masculine glance will tell whether or not it is becoming. Although everyone is occupied in Venezuela and there is no unemployment, there are always men on the street ready to admire a pretty woman and let her know it. Unquestionably this praise, these expressions of admiration, consciously or unconsciously awake an echo in the female soul and shed a glow over it. The girl who comes home from a walk in the course of which she has been called pretty twenty times must of necessity feel herself content.

Within the last few years the government banned this sort of compliment under penalty of a fine. Needless to say, it is as prevalent as ever, when the police are not in sight, at least. At dangerous moments, when a very pretty woman passes and a man must give vent to his admiration at any risk, he will restrict himself to saying with finality:

'Let them fine me!'

The passer-by will need no explanation of his meaning.

Man's gallantry, however, is not limited to compliments and affable expressions. It is more effective and dependable than that. If a woman finds herself in a dangerous situation or in any kind of difficulty, she will invariably find some man at hand to aid her.

A real gallant will never contradict a woman, although she may be talking the worst kind of lies and nonsense. He would lose his self-respect by doing so. In his *Young Man of Caracas*, Thomas Ybarra relates an episode which was known to me

long before I knew to whom it happened, and which is a fine example of the masculine idea of gallantry. Soldiers entered a house looking for a man who was to be arrested on political charges. His mother assured them he was not in the city. As they were about to leave, it developed through the carelessness of some third party that he actually was in the house. Instead of taking advantage of this chance discovery to seize the presumed culprit, the leader of the party bowed low before the lady, assured her that 'if she said he was not there, he wasn't,' turned, and walked away.

Episodes similar in spirit, if not in substance, now that there are no more revolutions, are commonplace.

They tell a story of a president we had some time ago who provoked an international conflict and an incredible situation by declaring Venezuela, with less than four million inhabitants, at war with England, France, Belgium, and Germany. When Wilhelmina, queen of the Netherlands, threatened to join the opposition, Cipriano Castro, the ever-gallant, is said to have sent out an official communication to this effect:

'I do not fight with women.'

He must have found his inspiration in the proverb, 'Never strike a woman, not even with a rose petal!'

Many a time a son, knowing his mother to be in error, and at the risk of his own standing, has said:

'My mother is always right.'

Man's gallantry is frequently exhibited in tangible ways. When a woman boards a streetcar, bus, or any other public conveyance, every man near-by will offer her his seat. If she is carrying a package, bag, or child, they will help her with it. At the theater, in movies, or other public places, excepting only in the buses at the hours of noon and five o'clock, no man will ever push a woman to make room for himself. Often, on the contrary, he will give her his own place. She is always given the proper side upon the sidewalk. If she expresses her appreciation with a nod, the gentleman removes his hat with a cordial bow.

In social life she is assisted with her wraps, in and out of cars, across the street or dance floor, or to a seat. She will never pick up anything she drops, but always waits for some gentleman to do it for her.

Woman, in short, receives every kind of outer deference and respect. If her opinion in business and like matters is usually ignored, in matters of sentiment she is listened to with devotion. She is thus a sort of minister without portfolio, a president without legislative powers, an oracle which no one consults until he wants to know what she has to say. As minister, president, and oracle, she has her courtiers and admirers entrusted with the ritual of her cult.

But if woman is the oracle, man is in charge of the interpretation, and he interprets according to his own ideas.

A Timeless World

ONE DAY when we had just finished lunch, the family was gathered in the gallery. Mother stood at a table with some vases in which she was arranging gardenias and daisies. Héctor, who had an article to finish, paced up and down, studying the tiled floor, and stopping occasionally to dash off a few sentences at the typewriter. This journalist brother of mine has been known to say that it would be easier to form correct notions about the international situation if the world were pyramidal and one could sit at the apex; he finds it harder to see all around a globe. As for Alta gracia, she, not yet engaged to Ramiro, swayed gently in her rocker as she drew threads in a tablecloth she meant to hem. She looked like what she is: a charming incarnation of the Venezuela of past and prejudice, which immured women behind barred windows, actual or symbolic. As for me, I was turning over some dull statistics on petroleum production.

Father had tuned in on an international news broadcast. When the commentator stopped, we suddenly heard the twang of a guitar, the rattle of *maracas*, and then a voice singing:

I was born by the Arauca's rapid waters,
The brother of flowers, herons, foam, and sun. . .

Little Misty and Yarima had started a duet at the piano in the drawing-room. Johnny Walker, the dog, enchanted by their heavy-handed rhythm, accompanied it with howls and

seemed also to be beating time with his tail. The counterpoint was enriched distantly by Presentación, singing at her tubs in the back yard. The song of the *llanos*, the great plains of Venezuela, cut across the voices of the household.

Father switched off the radio.

'Who'll go to the plains with me for a little outing?' he asked.

Mother laid down her flowers, Héctor halted his promenade, and Altagracia dropped her sewing and I my papers.

'I'll go! Of course I'll go!' I cried. 'When do we start?'

'Right away,' said Father.

'But, my love,' Mother interrupted, 'didn't you tell me you have a very important engagement for tomorrow?'

'That's so,' Father admitted. 'I'd better telephone and put it off for a few days.'

'Have you some business to attend to on the plains?' Mother went on.

'No. I'd just like to take a look at them. It will give the girls a chance to swim in the river, dance the *joropo*, and get to know their country better. Pack up your things, my pretties.'

Poor Altagracia! The cult of man is not always simple. She owed a duty to her uncle, but it would be hard to miss Ramiro's visits.

'How soon shall we be back?' she asked, folding up her work.

'You can always tell when you're leaving,' Father said, 'but you never know when you're getting back.' He was reverting to the plainsman's habit of speaking in proverbs.

At two o'clock he was saying that we would leave at once, but it was after ten that night when we struck out along the highway. We girls were dead for sleep, but even Altagracia, now that we had started, was eager for the adventure.

We had passed several days in the paradise of the *llanos* and had been traveling four months altogether when Father announced one afternoon that we must be returning to Caracas.



'It's about time,' he said, 'for me to keep that appointment.'

'What appointment?' I asked, surprised. 'Not the one you had for the day after we left?'

'That very one,' he said. He added with conviction: 'It is wrong to keep people waiting.'

And so, to keep an appointment already one hundred and twenty days delayed, we decided to go back to Caracas, the city of the liberators. This incident illustrates better than anything else what little importance time has for us Venezuelans.

Once when she was leaving for a long stay in Europe a childhood friend assured me eagerly at La Guaira dock:

'I shall write you soon — very soon — immediately!'

Days passed, then weeks and months, and at last, after almost three years of silence, I received a letter from her. With the exception of announcing her marriage to her old beau, she wrote as if we had seen each other only yesterday, and she did not even offer an excuse for her delay.

As you may well see, for us Venezuelans the idea of time scarcely exists. Time has no value save what we care to give it. Our appreciation of it is purely relative; we do things when we take the notion, not before and not after. When an appointment is made for a certain time, both parties know the meeting will actually occur only when each is ready — a half-hour, an hour, or two hours late. Tardiness in invitations or appointments is the sin most readily forgiven, since everyone knows himself a sinner.

Venezuela is full of watches and clocks, on men's and women's wrists and in church towers, dining-rooms, offices, restaurants, and cafés. But no one looks at them. Like flowers in pots and fat-bellied little angels in garden fountains, they are decorative, little more.

A schoolgirl of whom I am very fond asked me to make her a present of a watch, a wrist watch, as a reward for good marks in her examinations. Surprised, I asked her:

'Why do you want a watch?'

'It would look so pretty on my wrist,' she answered with assurance.

At home we have a clock that was presented to my grandfather by one of the twenty states of Venezuela in recognition of his political and philanthropic work. Its face is set with rubies, and when it runs it strikes the hours melodiously. When it runs, I say — but that is very seldom. It doesn't like these modern times, I gather, what with no crinolines and revolutions, and it often stages a silence strike in its decaying majesty. But we have another clock that does run. It used to stop and stay stopped for several days at a time without anyone's bothering to wind it. Then Father decided to take it into his care. Father is very particular and orderly. He has, for example, a pair of small black scissors which his mother gave him when he was a child. We know he has them, for Mother has seen them on two or three occasions. At other times they are shut up in a drawer out of sight of prying eyes. The key of the drawer is on a ring that he always carries. Having taken pity on the orphaned clock, he has hidden its key as well, and none of the rest of us has ever been able to locate it. Religiously each week, he appears in the gallery with the key, mounts a chair, winds the clock, steps down, and says:

'That is a good little clock, if you treat it well.'

That is a little slur on us, since we always forgot to wind or oil it. Once Father went on a trip that kept him away from home for two months. On his return, as soon as he had greeted us, right there in the gallery we watched him open his valise and produce the clock key. He had taken it with him for fear that in his absence we might monkey with the works. For fifty-two days the clock had not been running, and none of us had been aware of it.

In spite of the hebdomadal responsibility he has assumed toward the clock, Father does not care whether the hour is

three or four. Not at all. He does business on the Venezuelan system:

'I'll see you on San Francisco Street between three and five.' Or, 'We'll meet toward evening at the Gradillas corner.'

Although he is oblivious of clocks throughout the day, when evening comes he wants to know the time exactly so as to be sure to hear the international news over the radio. Mario García Arocha's excellent broadcasts, and Toscanini's concerts from New York have set our house clock going regularly.

As for Mother, the passing of the hours leaves her totally indifferent. Ten and eleven-thirty are equally good, for her. My brother and I, as journalists, live for the news stories and the articles we write, without clocking them closely. Presentación is sometimes homesick in her laundry for the house we used to live in, where she could hear the bells of the cathedral every quarter-hour. Her only need of knowing the time exactly is on Sunday morning. She likes to be at mass on time, and she manages it by listening for the bells of the near-by church, which announce the hour when it begins. It also strikes at noon, and at six it sounds the Angelus, when all good Catholics invoke the name of God.

Once when I was to play in a tennis tournament I looked for Presentación, to ask her if my tennis clothes had been ironed. She looked at me in silence for a moment and then confessed she had forgotten to do it. She added by way of consolation:

'Don't worry, child. If you don't wear those clothes today, you can tomorrow or the day after. Whether you play "tannis" or don't play "tannis" or whether you do things fast or slow, we all get to where we're going in the end.'

I said:

'If you think time is so unimportant, why did you worry so much about it at the other house? Why did you have such fun counting the strokes of the cathedral clock?'

Tucking her white chemise into the white fullness of her wrapper, she answered without a smile:

'I'll tell you, child. I counted the strokes of the cathedral clock so as not to forget the mathematics your grandmother taught me in other days.'

The mathematics my grandmother taught Presentación consisted of counting up to a hundred on her fingers. The apprenticeship which she dated as 'in other days' was served more than fifty years ago, when Grandmother was on her honeymoon. Cuba still belonged to Spain; Gómez was not to be president for many years yet; talkies, radio, Communism, income tax, all were unknown.

Presentación is not unique in her concept of time. It is pretty well established in Venezuela. Once a friend of Altagracia's called her on the telephone. They chatted for a normal period, thirty or forty minutes, let us say. Suddenly the lady said:

'Listen, dear, will you please hold the line a moment? The flower man has just come, and I want to buy some pinks. It won't take me a minute.'

Altagracia waited for a while and then called Misty to hold the receiver while she went to get some fruit from the end of the yard. After a few minutes she returned, ate the fruit, washed her hands, and took the receiver from the child. She still had some minutes to wait before her friend's voice came over the wire again. They carried on as if there had been no break, despite an interval of twelve or fifteen minutes.

In undertaking to hold the line, Altagracia, of course, had known what she was letting herself in for. *Momentico* — 'a short moment' — is one of the most elastic words in the whole Spanish vocabulary. Almost more so than *mañana*, and that is saying something. If some friend announces that she will come to call 'in a moment,' she may be expected any time between the hours of two and nine.

'I'm coming to spend a little while with you tomorrow,' Aunt Josefina once remarked to Mother.

Her little while lasted from ten one morning until ten the next. Women do not go out alone after dark, and her husband could not come to get her; so she had to stay overnight with us. That is a very mild example. I know a boy who telephoned his grandfather:

'Listen, old dear, I'm coming by to see you for a moment.'

Being lonely, the old man asked him to remain 'a day or two.' That was three years ago. The grandson is still spending his 'moment' in his forbear's house.

This airy elasticity is not limited to time, but is displayed in other things as well.

I once went to the kitchen to ask the cook for the recipe of a certain delicious flaky pastry. I carried pencil and paper to take down the directions, especially the necessary quantities. The cook, a real Venezuelan Vatel, began to describe the process:

'Well, you take some flour, spread it on the board, and drop some egg yolks on it. Then you mix it with your hands. . . .'

'How much flour?' I interrupted.

'Oh, a little bit.'

'How much is a little bit?'

'Why, a little bit is just so much, neither a little nor a lot. It's — just a little bit.'

'All right. Go on.'

Smoothing out her apron, she continued:

'After you have kneaded it a little while . . .'

'How long? How many minutes?'

'Oh, just a little while, child, a little while. . . . After you have kneaded it a little while, as I tell you, you put in a little salt, some butter, and a bit of milk, and then you put it in an oven that is neither hot nor cold and leave it there a little while.'

'About how long is this little while that I have to leave it in the oven?' I inquired as delicately as I could. I did not want to press her to define her *momentico* too often.

The cook stood looking at me for some seconds. To herself

I'm sure she was exclaiming, 'What can they teach a girl in school when she knows nothing about anything and asks such foolish questions?' But with the meekness and respect habitual in Venezuelan servants, she patiently continued:

'Why, you leave it in the oven a little while, just a bit of time, only a little while. Then you take it out and it is done.'

The only definite thing I could learn from her was that she used four egg yolks. With that explained, everything, of course, was as clear as day. You take a little flour and add four egg yolks, knead it for a spell, then put in some butter, some salt, and a bit of milk, and set the mixture in an oven that is neither hot nor cold for another little while. After that all you have to do is eat it in no time at all. Where was my head? If the cook explained something to Presentación that way and asked her if she understood, our old laundress would be almost offended by the question and would reply:

'Understand? Of course I do! It couldn't be simpler. It's as clear as cockcrow.'

In the same category with *momentico* are the words *unos días* and *un tiempito*.

A man who announces that his wife died *hace unos días* — a few little days ago — in all probability has been a widower two or three years.

An attractive couple whom I met at a club were speaking of their approaching wedding. To make conversation, I asked if they had been going long together.

'*Un tiempito* — a short little time,' he answered, smiling at his fiancée.

'Yes,' she amiably explained, 'it's been twelve years.'

I asked another couple who were surrounded by a romantic glow if they were on their honeymoon.

'No,' the wife answered, 'we have been married for a short little time. . . . We have seven children; our oldest will soon enter the university.'

I took a pair of shoes to the cobbler's to be mended. When I asked him when they would be ready, he replied:

'Well, come tomorrow. . . . No, better come a little later, in a day or two.'

Two and a half months later I went to get them. They had been finished that very morning.

It is not only fashionable but prudent to arrive late at parties. Every host expects his guests to be one and a half or two hours late at least. A French couple was invited to an evening party to begin at nine. They were delayed by traffic jams and arrived at ten. The young ladies of the household were still serenely bathing and dressing; they could not believe that guests would have the bad taste to arrive only an hour late. Their little brother had to be delegated to take magazines and cocktails to the visitors to keep them entertained while waiting.

We maintain an open door policy socially, and callers are not necessarily announced. When one arrives, she is ushered into the living-room by a servant or one of the younger daughters, who explains:

'Mama wants me to ask you please to wait a minute. She is coming right away.'

Before appearing the hostess must bathe, dress, comb her hair, and pick up around the house. The caller, who expects to wait, takes the situation philosophically, inspects the furniture and the pictures and books, and may willingly or otherwise hear the intimate details of family life, thanks to the indiscretions of the children who have been instructed to amuse her.

In places like New York where speed and haste prevail, our way may seem absolutely unendurable and maddening. Every place, like a melody, has a rhythm of its own. To us it is normal, perfectly endurable, even logical. From our point of view, haste, worry, and slavery to time lead nowhere. By adjusting the rhythm of life to a slower pace we increase our happiness and our appreciation of the things about us. Who would want to hear Beethoven's Ninth played in the frenzied rhythm of boogie-woogie? How can anyone enjoy the beauty

of the New York sky line if he is at the Battery at seven minutes to three and has an appointment in Times Square for three exactly? How is it possible to relish oysters, get all the pleasure of a cup of coffee, relax with a cigarette, when there are only twenty minutes free for lunch? How can one find time for self-communion and the inner life and seek through knowledge to attain perfection if one has entered in a little book things to do each hour of the day?

In the efficient North American scheme of pigeonholing ideas, thoughts, things, and people — serving life up with a medicine dropper, as it were — what place is left for fancy, novelty, improvement, and the unforeseen? It must be painfully monotonous to know ahead what you will be doing each hour on every Tuesday, Saturday, and Sunday. How can people who live that way be actors and spectators of life?

I heard a very interesting opinion expressed by a man who professed the philosophy of *momentico* to another who was always in a hurry.

'After all,' he said, 'man's greatest aspiration, the things we all desire and seek, the things that make us work, are happiness and leisure. If you were suddenly to stop one of those individuals who know just how many minutes it takes to eat a sandwich and who dash about all day keeping appointments, and ask him why he does it, he will tell you after some deliberation:

"I hurry to do all those things each day, hoping to increase my business. When that improves, I make more money, and more money means I can save and become rich."

"And when you're rich?" you ask him, and in all probability he will answer after pondering a moment:

"Well, when I'm rich I shall not have to work so hard and shall be able to take a rest."

'Rest! That is the mystery. You spend your life wearing yourself out in order to rest later on! Wouldn't it be better not to exhaust yourself? Make time your slave and not yourself a slave to time!'

This philosophy is so widespread and common with us that few ever bother to think of clocks when keeping appointments, attending entertainments, or whatever. Children are the only things that arrive on time at home; the first can safely be looked for nine or ten months after a marriage. Our religion prevents the use of birth control or the acceptance of Malthusian theories.

Since almost all our people are unpunctual, no one can make any very serious complaint when someone else is late.

I have a friend who is invariably very late for everything. If he is invited to a wedding, he arrives after the couple have departed on their honeymoon. He almost missed the baptism of his first-born. When one of the rare punctual Venezuelans attempted to reprove him for this habit, he explained:

'Look here — when someone invites you to a party, a wedding, or whatever it may be, he does it to give you a good time and not to bother you. If you have to interrupt something pleasant you are doing and hurry, worry, and figure how you can arrive on time, it would be better not to be invited. If you go to parties to enjoy yourself, there's no point in being made miserable beforehand, least of all by clocks.'

This idea of time, this lack of rigorous adherence to the discipline of an arbitrary demarcation of the hours, is typical of our Venezuelan youth. Originally, when all humanity was young and happy, no one cared what time it was. Men were guided by changes of light upon the earth and the color of the skies above. Finally the sundial was invented, but even that was not exact. The nineteenth century made universal the horrid habit of carrying the burden of the exact time in the form of the pocket watch. As if decrepitude, death, oblivion, and everything we see around us did not sufficiently reveal how life slips away! Can anything be more unbearable than the striking of a clock on a sleepless night or when one is watching beside a sickbed? It is the heartbeat of eternity. 'Why do you hasten so, fool that you are,' the solemn strokes seem to ask, 'when the tomb awaits you from the cradle?'

Presentación's philosophy is mournfully sound. Running or not, we all reach our ordained end.

The majority of philosophers pay scant attention to time in its transitory aspects. They concern themselves with time as a totality and an abstraction, but not with its component parts of hours and minutes. The great Voltaire was absent-minded and forgetful of time; he wore shoes of different colors and never kept an appointment on the dot. He lived within his own mind, where clocks did not exist. Almost every man who has achieved fame by reason of a rich inner life has been occupied with more important things than punctuality. Even Jesus was unconcerned about the hour, or we should not have had the miracle of the loaves and fishes when he suddenly realized that he had talked away the day and his listeners had had nothing to eat. He trod the roads of Galilee slowly and as it might seem idly, indifferent to the passing of the hours, because he was attending to the more immediate needs of human hearts.

Servants White and Black

ESTEFANÍA came to us when she was barely eight — from the western Andes with her mother, whether on a burro's back or the front seat of a truck I do not know. It is a five-day trip in a good bus. They came in search of work, obeying the call of Caracas, which draws a constant migratory population. The social consequences of this situation are unpredictable. The city, on the one hand, broadens the individual and enables him to enjoy comparative prosperity; but the western country districts, the granary of the nation, are being steadily depleted.

It may have been the journey, undernourishment, or the difficulty country people find in adjusting themselves rapidly to city life. Perhaps she was already ill. In any case, Estefanía's mother soon passed away in the hospital. The nursing sisters tried in vain to learn the name of the child's father in order to let him know what had occurred. The sick woman merely shook her head and died without revealing what seemed to be her melancholy secret.

Estefanía, meanwhile, was staying in a tenement, where she was cared for by the neighbors of an aunt who had made the exodus to the city earlier. A Venezuelan woman can be talkative and critical at times, but when the hour arrives to show the feeling in her breast, she rises to the very height of grandeur. She has the heart of gold that people talk about. The little orphan found several mothers to replace the one whom

she had lost, and the neighbors worked miracles with their black beans and rice to feed another mouth. But the difficulty of keeping their own children fed was so great that Estefanía's presence at last became a burden. When that time arrived, her aunt, who came to our house selling sweetmeats, said to Mother:

'*Misia*,' as they call the lady of the house, 'you wouldn't by any chance like to have a little girl, a little serving-maid? She's eight years old, an orphan, industrious, and white.'

When Estefanía arrived, with her well-worn *alpargatas*, her dress faded from many washings, her little bundle that contained all her worldly goods, her big sad eyes and even sadder heart, Mother and I knew that a life had been put into our hands. From that day on, if she stayed, she would be our chattel, to dispose of almost according to our pleasure. We could make her miserable or happy, ruin her new life, or help her to grow and find her way.

Mother and I watched each other silently, each seeking in the other's eyes the answer to the problem. Did we have the right to make ourselves masters of another's life?

'What will happen if I do not keep her?' Mother asked the child's aunt. 'Who is responsible for her?'

'Her mother left her with me, but you know, *misia*, that I have seven children of my own, and their father, who is a mason, fell from a ladder and hasn't been able to work for several months.'

Mother did not ask if the man had workmen's compensation. Social security in those days was almost unknown in Venezuela. Only in recent years a new labor law with 236 articles and 416 regulations has been enacted. Article 101 provides for indemnity in case of accident or illness incurred in the exercise of duty, with medical, surgical, and pharmaceutical attendance and food during the period of incapacity. Prior to this law, the poor laborer was wholly at the mercy of his employer.

The Venezuelan household servant is to all intents and pur-



poses under the jurisdiction of the lady of the house in which she works. If conditions are too unpleasant, the most that she can do is to seek employment elsewhere.

Estefanía was a minor and an orphan, with no known relative save an aunt, and with every prospect of being placed under a guardian or in an orphanage or other public institution. I cannot say from personal experience whether our orphanages are good or bad, but I do know that they have the worst kind of reputation among the lower classes. When Mother suggested an orphanage to Estefanía's aunt, the woman raised her hands in horror and exclaimed:

'An orphanage, ma'am! But she is one of God's creatures!'

From her tone one would have thought that Mother had recommended the anteroom to hell. Nevertheless, if we had not taken her, Estefanía would have had to go to one while an effort was made to locate her father. For a child of eight it was a dismal outlook.

'Isn't she very small to work?' asked Mother, still in doubt.

'Heavens, no, ma'am! Her mother told me she can already hull corn.'

'Hull corn! That is hard work even for a grown-up.'

Estefanía, a child of eight, an orphan, industrious, and white, remained with us to help in the work of the house and learn to be a servant. In exchange for her lost childhood and the games and laughter suited to her age, she would have a home, food, and clothes.

Estefanía! You are the symbol of an evil in Venezuelan life that cries aloud for remedy. If we had not taken you, you would have known the gray anonymity of an orphanage, the gloomy uproar of a tenement, or some other dreadful place where there might well have been no woman with a mother's heart. You were one of the hundreds of thousands of undernourished children who receive, perhaps, half the daily calories they need. You were one of the multitude of children for whom there are no schools. Society did not give you, Este-

fanía, who are the hope of the future Venezuela, what was rightly yours.

In all the years you served us, Estefanía, you never smiled. Your face was pathetically serious, when you stood on a box in the scullery to wash the dishes, when you watered the flowers in the pots, when you swept up the leaves that the wind had blown from the trees in the patio, when you put on your white apron, when you were initiated into the great mysteries of wrapping the *ballacas*. It was not only in your working hours that you were sad and serious. I used to see you just the same on Sundays when you went to mass in your white kerchief, holding Presentación's hand; when the children of the household asked you to share their games and you said no, because you had your work to do; when I offered you toys and candy to see if I could not surprise a smile; when Héctor gave you money for the movies; when Mother, who felt sorry because you were an orphan, held you on her knees, as she did her own grandchildren, and taught you your letters and stroked your blond hair. Never, Estefanía, did I see you laugh, and your seriousness, your precocious maturity that took the place of childish gaiety, used to make me unhappy. Your presence was a mute reproach to an unthinkingly cruel society.

The simple duties which Mother had given you, and others which you found on your own initiative, you performed perfectly, too perfectly. I used to watch you from behind my books, through the hammock or the flowers, to see if I could catch you in an error. I wanted you to break a plate, shout, scratch your knee, break the stem of a flower, or spill the filling of an *ballaca* — do something careless or silly, merely to prove that you were human, really only eight and just a little girl. If I could not see you laugh, I wished at least that you might give evidence of some small failing. But no. You lacked all the really human frailties; you could neither laugh nor make mistakes. Life and a sense of impending tragedy had aged you in your cradle. From infancy, Estefanía, you

faced the portals of old age. In your green eyes was all the sadness in the world.

Hundreds like you existed in our country. In almost every household in Caracas there was a little girl who had arrived one day, with her torn *alpargatas*, her little bundle of worn clothes beneath her arm, her little legs thin from undernourishment, her eyes sad as with a mute reproach. She was brought there by some woman, an older sister, a grandmother, or an aunt who could not care for her because she was already weighed down by her own problems and anxieties.

Like you, these children might have had poetic names like Estefanía or Esperanza or been simply Luisa, Margarita, or Antonia. They might come from the mountains, and have white skin and blond hair; or from the plains, with golden skin and dark brown hair; or from the coast, with the black hair of mulattoes and the mestizo's high cheekbones.

There were many such who passed through our house and whose names and faces I have now forgotten. I only remember Mother's words, always the same, when she saw their pitiful tatters and told her grandchildren:

'Misty, get one of your dresses for this new little girl. . . . Yarima, bring one of your toys, she hasn't any.'

Never thinking of herself, Mother practiced and sowed in youthful minds the finest principles of humanity and ideal democracy. Along with her grandchildren's clothes, these Estefanías of the people received cod-liver oil and vitamin capsules, the rudiments of knowledge and sciences which at

they may marry and burden themselves with children who also will know misery, or remain single and have children just the same.

The child servant usually works without pay. As her skill increases, she can earn from three dollars to six dollars a month. When she is fully grown she commands anywhere from fourteen dollars to forty-two dollars, with three rolls each day or fifty cents extra a month to buy them. But she must be remarkable to get forty-two dollars.

The domestic servant is almost completely unaware of the new labor legislation providing a nine-hour day, a half-day off, and a two weeks' vacation with pay; instead, her outings are limited to mass on Sundays and an occasional evening at the movies. Once in two or four months she may ask permission to visit a friend, go shopping, or take a streetcar ride. Possibly her mistress will send her to the band concert in a near-by square on Sunday afternoon. She may even permit the girl to go and stand at the front door in the evening when her work is finished; chauffeur, mason, laborer, or baker will then stroll by and talk with her of love.

That is the life of the average Venezuelan servant. If she becomes a mother, everything is more difficult and cruel, for her as well as for the child she bears. Our labor law covers this possibility to some extent by stipulating that employers allow expectant mothers six weeks' leave with pay before the child is born and a like period after the event, with additional time in case of complications. It also calls for rest periods for nursing mothers, and it requires the establishment of special rooms where working mothers may leave their children in factories employing more than thirty women. A servant with a baby has a hard time getting a place. If she is strong and well, she may serve as a wet nurse; in that event, she must leave her own child in a government nursery or relegate it to a wooden box in the yard of the house where she works — uncared for, dirty, and alone.

Growing up in these conditions, sad and lonely, the serv-

ant's offspring is responsible for the expression, 'They treat me as if I were the child of the cook!' In many households, as in my own, for instance, the children of the help are given attention and affection. The mistress will often arrange for them to be baptized, and becoming thus their godmother, she assumes all manner of obligations toward them. Mother has something like a dozen godchildren; I have three. Periodically they come to see us, seeking clothes, vitamins and medicines, and recommendations to doctors, hospitals, and schools.

Venezuela now has social service workers to inspect houses where minors are employed and see that sanitary, nutritional, and moral needs are met. The work of minors in factories and business and industrial enterprises is also regulated, and no child under fourteen can be employed in such places. There is no age limitation, however, for servants like little Estefanía. The new law unquestionably represents a great advance, but as long as children have to work to secure the elementary needs of life, much remains to be accomplished.

Venezuela, like China, is full of servants. Each house has two or three at least. After rent, help is the most pressing item in the budget. Each maid has her specific duties. One works exclusively in the kitchen, another does the 'inside work,' and a third the laundry. None of them would undertake two of these kinds of work. The inside maid will never put a pot on the stove, nor the laundress make a bed.

Three maids, one for each of these major duties, is the minimum in a respectable household. Clothes are never sent out to be washed. A laundress is regularly employed, and a helper may be called in on occasion. The staff may range anywhere from three to fifteen or even more. In the house of a relative of mine there are five inside servants and seven outside. The lady of the house seldom takes an active part in the work of the household. She confines herself to supervising and directing a complex world of servants in the great universe of houses.

As long as I lived at home with my parents, I never touched

a broom or washed a dish. The organization of the household was such that no members of the family ever needed to do any such work. No daughter of a respectable family ever removes a plate from the table to the kitchen, scours a pot, or washes a handkerchief. If cooking attracts them, the girls will frequent the kitchen to learn how certain dishes are prepared. When they go into the back yard, it is not to take a hand with the laundry, but to admire the hens and trees; or they may carry a sweet to the cook's baby outdoors there.

No respectable person will eat in the kitchen; that is where the servants eat, and their food is not the same as the family's. For the most part, the servants eat black beans, rice, *arepas* (cassava bread), plantains, coffee, and *guarapo*, a drink prepared from dark cane sugar.

Presentación was the faithful and unselfish servant of my grandmother's generation. Her counterpart is found in almost every household, a devoted woman who has grown old within its walls. For more than fifty years Presentación has been working for my family. She came to my grandmother as a young woman, remained throughout her early years of married life, was present at my mother's birth, and loved her so much that she went along when Mother left her parents' home to establish one of her own. She saw the birth of Mother's children and of her three grandchildren. Like a member of the family, she has witnessed and shared all the good and bad that has befallen us.

My brother and I love and respect Presentación as an aged aunt or a black grandmother. As children, whenever we were sick, we would see our Presentación's dark face bending over us, close to the white face of our mother. On sleepless nights or when we were afraid, she would calm us with her stories and bits of Venezuelan history that she had witnessed. She took us to band concerts in Plaza Bolívar and to call at the houses of the poor, her friends. She told us stories of her distant childhood when the country was in the throes of civil war. She satisfied our endless curiosity, relating the details of

Father's and Mother's courtship, the childhood ailments of all our aunts and uncles, the fashions in vogue in Grandmother's day, the cutting of our first teeth, and the first steps we took. Such things stand forth in her mind as episodes of vast importance. She knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us as her own, the white flesh of her black. Her mind and heart have no room for thoughts of any other home than ours, which for so many years has been her own, nor for any other family than our own, whose birth she has witnessed and assisted.

However hard we try to make her more familiar, with our hugs and the jokes we play, Presentación always keeps her distance and treats us with immense respect, preceding our names with Miss or Master: 'Miss Olga!' 'Master Héctor!' . . .

First Grandmother and later Mother organized and controlled Presentación's life. She herself has no initiative today in practical matters. Money, to her, is wholly insignificant.

'*Misia* Mercedes, I'd rather you didn't pay me every month, but kept the pennies somewhere. I don't know what to do with them.'

And actually she doesn't know the use of money, unless sometimes to give it to poor friends, and once a year, perhaps, buy herself a dress, some shoes, and a large black shawl.

Time and styles have passed, like the water in her tub, and left no trace upon her. She still dresses like the old women in the era of the winning of our independence, in a blouse that fits close about the neck, with lace and many pleats, and a full skirt which is also trimmed with narrow lace. Her woolly hair is covered with a colored kerchief, over which she wears, when she goes out, a wide black shawl like the Mexican *rebozo*.

She has never told us where she came from or anything about her family, and if anyone asks her why she never married, she answers philosophically:

'Why should I marry, child, and be burdened with a lot of black children like me?'

Presentación is officially our laundress, and I defy all the commercial laundries and all the Chinese washermen in the world together to wash silk slips, lace handkerchiefs, or baby clothes with equal skill. Venezuelan laundresses and Venezuelan sun have a special knack of bringing back their original whiteness to soiled clothes.

Anyone in the household who is in need of help runs to Presentación, who has a remedy for every ill. Whether it is a question of watching through long nights of sickness, sitting up with lovers, taking the younger servants to mass, assisting at a childbirth, or merely taking a package to the other end of town, Presentación is always ready.

She possesses a store of absurd objects of trifling value which assume a mysterious, ephemeral importance — tissue paper saved from saints' days, bits of string of every known variety, prayers and scapularies guaranteed to be efficacious, soaps for removing stains, household remedies, bottles of all sizes, black pennies for the children, faded pictures of the family, baptismal cards, ribbons, keys, and a thousand things besides.

However foolish any need may seem, she will listen and satisfy it. Not only can she supply whatever may be needed, but she also has a treasury of memories, words, comments, and proverbs which she draws on at the appropriate moment.

Although she is black and a servant, she possesses wisdom such as those who sought the philosopher's stone might well have envied, a natural wisdom based on experience and silent observation. She has the open mind and shrewdness of our colored people who listen and think, but make no comment. Without anyone's having taught her, since even in her distant childhood she never went to school, she possesses innate good judgment and some intuitive sense that always tells her what is right and true. Never has she been heard to utter a stupid phrase or an imprudent word.

Like Sancho Panza, she has a wealth of words and proverbs full of the great wisdom of simple souls. No one has ever yet

dismayed her by telling of things unknown or hard to comprehend. Her store of proverbs serves her every purpose. If by chance she finds herself beyond her depth, she will say, wiping her hands on her apron:

'Water doesn't run uphill. How can you expect a black woman like me to know such things? No one demands discrimination in a burro.'

As is usually the case with Negroes who have passed their youth, no one would venture a guess at her age. She looks as much like fifty as like seventy. She dyes her hair, which the years have whitened, and her head has the black luster of crows' wings. This coquettish little lapse is the sole deception that her forthright nature will admit.

Like a ship at anchor in a harbor, her life is moored to someone else's home, a home of the white gentry. She has pressed Grandmother's wedding veil, Mother's gowns and mine, my daughters' baby clothes. She loves our white family as if it were of her own flesh and blood and shows that love in the abnegation and fidelity of a slave. She stands between them and the minor blows of life.

Generations pass, but Presentación presides at her tub, a living poem of white suds and black hands — black hands and a pure-white soul.

Respectability and Hair

ALTAGRACIA and I were living in Madrid before the Spanish civil war. We were both attending a well-known dancing school to learn the picturesque and graceful gypsy dances. Spaniards boast that foreigners, being unable to absorb the actual soul of Spain, can never quite succeed in interpreting their regional dances correctly. That is true of foreigners in general, but not of Latin Americans. Coming from the same racial stock, sharing the same intellectual refinement and artistic temperament, and possessing so many defects and qualities in common, it is only natural that the expression of our souls should be akin.

Altagracia had learned to do the gypsy dances very well. Whether because of someone's having seen her dance at the academy or for some charity affair, or because of her striking and exotic beauty and her unusual grace and bearing, she one day received an extraordinary letter offering an engagement in a Spanish theater with the payment and billing of a star. A leading impresario would undertake to manage her artistic and theatrical career with the sole proviso of her signing a contract to appear in a topical revue. Altagracia's type of beauty, it appeared, was exactly what the author, who was also artistic director, wanted for the leading rôle.

It was really an amazing proposition. A mother anywhere in the world, thanks to Hollywood, may dream of seeing her tot become another Shirley Temple, and growing girls long to



be an Argentinita or a Garbo. Fortunately, in Venezuela we do not suffer from this infectious ailment. There girls are reared in seclusion, and do not aspire to public life. The situation which confronted Altagracia was rather special. The men of the theater had come to her to offer a career and stardom before she had even begun. In Hollywood itself such a flight of fancy would hardly be encountered.

Altagracia went slightly mad for one whole morning. I watched her from time to time standing before the mirror and smiling at her own reflection, improvising new dance steps, laughing at nothing, calling up to ask the price of a magnificent sable wrap, pondering the relative desirability of diamonds and emeralds, deciding that in cars her preference was Pierce-Arrow, sending for a folder of cruises to the Orient, drinking a cocktail, buying a set of the Espasa Encyclopedia, and bowing formally to me. All this was quite unlike her, quite contrary to her placid, cautious nature. Apparently this business of being a star was not good for her nervous system.

As the day advanced, however, she gradually returned to normal. By three o'clock, the hour at which she was to give her answer to the offer, she was her natural self again. She even seemed a little sad. I was near the telephone when she called and gave a decisive *No*. She was grateful for the offer but could not possibly accept it. No, not even with better terms and the prospect of starring in the movies.

As she hung up the receiver, I exclaimed:

'What! I'm not to have a star for a cousin? No riding in Pierce-Arrows, with sable wraps and emerald diadems? No chance of my getting the job of secretary in charge of fan mail?'

'As a matter of fact,' she answered, 'I was thinking about it all morning, but the longer I thought the more convinced I became that an artificial life like that is not for me. Wouldn't you say so?'

'In a case like this the decision is entirely up to you. But I

would like to know just what it was that made you renounce the glory of the stage. Don't you like the idea of fame, applause, and money?'

'Like it? Of course I do! And yet at heart I'm not so sure. Even if they were to pester me to death, I never could accept it. It's no life for a respectable woman.'

'A woman's reputation is like a crystal,' I exclaimed, quoting before I realized it the favorite maxim and basic notion of my Aunt Josefina and many other dowagers of the old school.

'It may sound old-fashioned, but it's true. With the exception of Teresa Carreño, who made a reputation all over the world as a pianist, no Venezuelan woman has ever followed the stage as a career. A life upon the boards is not a proper life for a decent woman.'

'Your opinion seems to me a little drastic, but all of us must live according to our own ideas. The thing I most regret is those formal bows, but I suppose something must be sacrificed to respectability.'

Respectability! Respectability! It is a notion of vital importance in Venezuela, where ninety-nine per cent of the populace aspires to be respectable, or at least to pass as such.

Respectability is something so complex, elastic, involved, important, and desirable that it is more difficult to explain than the 'To be or not to be' of Shakespeare. To be or not to be — *respectable*: that is the question.

Defining respectability is a problem in a class with squaring the circle, drawing parallel lines that meet in infinity, understanding the harangues of politicians, or finding meaning in surrealist poetry.

At home in Caracas, I have asked a number of people to give me their idea of its meaning.

An aristocrat, who might have borne a title of nobility if her ancestors and the rest of the Creole or Spanish-descended patriots had not abolished them, told me:

'To be respectable is to be white, aristocratic, a member of

a distinguished family, and to conduct oneself accordingly.'

Another woman, also an aristocrat, but more interested in humanity than in titles of nobility, promptly answered:

'To be respectable is to be good and to conform with the precepts of charity and justice.'

'Regardless of color?' I interrupted.

'Regardless of color. My half-breed cook is more respectable than many a white person one encounters.'

A friend who was obviously a victim at the moment of cynicism and poor digestion joined the conversation.

'Respectability,' he said, 'is one of the items the market has on sale, and it can be bought with money like any other.'

Then a very old lady who lives in the past and sees no advantage in modernity, sharing the poet's view that the good old days were best, exclaimed:

'You may be right, Luis. It is impossible to tell today who is respectable and who isn't. New considerations which formerly were never mentioned are constantly coming up, and emphasis is placed on things that were once of little moment. So many people think themselves respectable today that it no longer means a thing. It's not like the old times when you knew the names, antecedents, lives, and doings of everyone who was respectable. This modernism!'

Defining respectability seemed simple, however, to a girl of marriageable age of the type which is born, lives, and dies with never an idea in her head. She assured me as she viewed herself in her handbag mirror:

'Why, a respectable boy is one who dresses well, drives a snappy car, belongs to clubs, talks brilliantly, and knows how to behave in society.'

'White?'

'Yes, he must have white skin and straight hair.'

Another girl, of the modern collegiate type, maintained:

'A respectable man is one who knows what he wants and why and is following a career with a cultural background above the average. He is never out of place in any company

or situation and knows how to adapt himself to circumstances because he is superior to them.'

A sociologist who was listening qualified:

'Respectability hasn't anything to do with culture. It is a sifting of the mind, quite apart from universities. It is an innate quality of thought, character, and manners which cannot be acquired. Natural dignity, in short.'

'In your opinion, then, respectability does not involve racial antecedents.'

'Race? Have you read Vasconcelos' book, *La Raza Cósmica* — "The Cosmic Race"? Have you formed your own idea of the Latin American of the future? Are you acquainted with the works of the great American thinkers? Are you aware of the material and social progress that Mexico is making as a result of the elimination of class distinction and racial prejudice? Any thinking man who knows our problems believes in intermarriage. Quite apart from the necessity, it is a magnificent experiment which deserves success. Pure races so far have produced nothing very remarkable. We have witnessed their stagnation and decay. Some attain great spiritual development and fail in the material aspects; others enjoy material prosperity but lack the spiritual. Since pure races have accomplished so little by themselves, it may be that the race of the future is destined to be a combination or amalgam of them all. In the man of tomorrow the qualities of many races will be united.'

'That,' I agreed, 'is certainly the opinion of many of our great thinkers. Latin America, with the exception of the few countries which have no racial problem — tropical America, that is — can secure its future only by rational and gradual racial mingling. The combination of Indians and whites has produced remarkable results. Venezuelans and Latin Americans in general have often been great men in spite of being half-breeds. Rubén Darío, the greatest poet of modern times and the initiator of the modern school of poetry, was a half-breed or mulatto. And many another as well.'

And what about the Negro problem?' asked an aristocratic lady with an expression of disgust.

'There are so few pure-blooded Negroes left that we do not need to consider them. Every great civilization of the world, including the Greek and Roman, has had its drop of Negro blood diluted in the masses. Venezuela, like many other Indo-American countries, is a vast filter from which the humanity of the future will emerge. What matters is not so much the color of the skin as high quality of mind, and that we have.'

But a Juan Bimba, a plain fellow who wears *alpargatas* and lives on beans, who has never been to school and is ignorant of many things, told me:

'A white man whose skin isn't "overdone" and who has money and is polite — he's respectable.'

His brother, another Juan Bimba, who had been to school, broke in:

'No, it isn't the hair or color that counts. It's the way you behave toward other folks.'

I was so exhausted by my inquiries that I went home hoping to hear no more about respectability. In the gallery that gives on the patio I heard Mother talking to one of her little granddaughters.

'Yarima,' she said, 'take your fingers out of your mouth. Respectable little girls do not put their fingers in their mouths.'

Cursing respectability, I went on into the second patio. There I had the hard luck to run into actual drama. Misty, the other granddaughter, was sitting in her little chair with her legs up on a table, sharpening a colored pencil. Presentación was looking on with disapproval. It was apparent that she had already been trying out her Ciceronian eloquence in an attempt to instill various ideas which froze in the high altitude of her little listener's indifference.

'See here,' Presentación repeated, 'when your mama was a little girl she never dreamed of marking the clothes in the washtub with colored crayons, nor of throwing stones at the

plants like children off the streets, either. If you paint the sheets red again, I'm going to tell and you'll be punished. And look at the way you're sitting. Respectable little girls are modest and never pull up their skirts and show their legs.'

Misty was not the least bit moved by this discourse. But I, meanwhile, was having the greatest difficulty to restrain my laughter, lest I set the bad example of disrespect for Presentación's authority. Not that I wanted to make fun of eloquence or stained clothes, but Presentación's words, 'Respectable little girls never show their legs,' reminded me of an episode long past, which I now saw in a different light.

I had just come back from Europe, and it was the first time I had worn my tennis shorts at home. They started a small domestic revolution. When I appeared in the kitchen in search of something, the maid stopped whatever she was doing, the cook forgot to put the chicken in the pot, and the kitchen helper dropped a plate. No one said a word, but everybody stared in open-eyed amazement. Just then Presentación came in, and she, too, stood frozen to the spot, blinking to make sure what she saw was real. Finally, with the assurance which she has as a result of being present at my birth, she asked respectfully:

'Are you sure you haven't forgotten something, child?'

I pretended to be thinking for a moment, and then turned brightly to the cook:

'Why yes, of course. I forgot to tell you to serve lunch. Father has just come in.'

Apparently Presentación had forgotten all about the episode of the tennis shorts when she was scolding Misty. Otherwise her bringing up and her notion of respect would have prevented her expressing any opinions about legs and decency.

'Tell me, Presentación,' I said, 'what is a respectable woman?'

'Well, your mother and your grandmother are respectable women, and also . . .'

As far as we are concerned, Presentación is practically a

member of the family and understands all our jokes and games. Throwing my arms around her, I said:

'Never mind the flattery, woman. I'm not going to give you any present. Don't talk about any special ones; just tell me what respectable people are like.'

For a few moments she was silent. Then she said:

'A respectable woman is one who properly fulfills her obligations as a wife, who is always courteous in speech and always neat and modest, who is kind to rich and poor alike, who is willing to make sacrifices for her children, who has the proper answer at the proper moment, and who always knows her place. She's like clean clothes — must always be tidy, white, and without a stain of any kind.'

Just as Presentación's loquacity achieved this poetico-launderial comparison, the cook came in. She put down her market basket overflowing with vegetables, took off her black shawl and carefully folded it, and taking out of her mouth the sprig of mint which she had been chewing, remarked:

'We see new things every day. Perhaps it's the war, or maybe the *mooseers*.' She meant foreigners. 'Anyway, the market was full of respectable women who had come with their cooks to superintend the buying. I didn't think respectable women went to market.

'Some of the men in the market are very fresh,' she went on. 'This morning the plantain man had the nerve to tell me I had taken ten plantains and had only paid for eight. I stood right up to him and told him he was altogether too suspicious and didn't know how to treat respectable women. Imagine! Me! Stealing two plantains from a shopkeeper, like a woman of the street!'

So that is respectability — a mysterious and subtle thing, with elements of clean clothes, white skin, social codes, high-necked gowns, covered legs, straight hair, good manners, wealth, honesty, culture, goodness, well-cut clothes, patents of nobility, bills paid on time, human dignity, and little-girls-must-never-put-their-fingers-in-their-mouths.

If from all this you have any concrete idea of what it is, if anyone can explain respectability, this notion which is in everybody's mind, this word you hear spoken in the streets, kitchens, churches, drawing-rooms, congressional chambers, mountains, newspapers, prisons, country districts, through the air and on the sea, please be good enough to tell me. I have a mad desire to know.

While I am waiting until someone can define it, I, like hundreds of thousands of other Venezuelans, continue to talk about respectability, awarding the term to this one and that or withholding it from them.

When I am in New York, in an apartment without maids or patios, where the housewife does everything herself, I tidy the place and do the buying and cooking, and then go into the living-room with my cup of coffee, turn on the radio, dab on a little perfume, fix my hair at the mirror, sit down in the most comfortable armchair, and exclaim:

'Now, with all my housework finished, I can take my coffee like a respectable woman!'

In the social, political, and even the economic life of Venezuela, hair is not the least important factor in respectability.

Generally speaking, white Venezuelans, the ones considered respectable, have hair flat as rainwater, of an indefinite light brown color which is neither fair nor dark. Common folks, on the other hand, have raven locks, curly in proportion to the dark ingredients in their blood, with every gradation of ringlet from the soft wave of those who conceal a mere five or ten per cent of dusky inheritance to the tight kinks, known as 'a handful of flies,' of the comparatively few who are still totally black — a chromatic scale of convolutions, as it were.

With us one of the first things you notice is a person's head. In the long run you will base your judgment on what there is inside, but you will inevitably begin by seeing what you can learn by looking at it. That is why the mulatto and the half-breed find it so much harder than the white man to achieve

success, and why, when they do achieve it, it is due solely to merit.

At an exhibition of paintings a lecturer was once addressing an audience of women. A young woman of marriageable age, with large green eyes and a romantic profile, speaking to the friend who was with her, said she found him very interesting. It was impossible to tell whether she was referring to the man himself or to what he had to say. In any case, her aunt, a woman of standing, with an ability to read between the lines, overheard her and exclaimed:

'Interesting he may be, but his hair is *anxious*.'

In other words, 'His skin is white; the dark percentage is small, but somewhere among his forbears was one who climbed trees.' Why it should be, I cannot say, but in Venezuela the notion is that colored people spend their lives like Tarzan of the Apes. Similarly, when we say 'out of the oven,' we are not referring to almond pastry or dessert, but merely to a head of hair curlier than God perhaps intended, the hand having outdone itself in the making. 'Hair like springs' is another common term.

As you can see, hair has more names than a Spanish infanta and to many people can be a tremendous drawback. Pure Negroes, however — those with hair like springs — do not bother to have it straightened as some do in the United States. Those electric straighteners, popular among Negroes in some North American cities, are unknown in Venezuela. Few there are who exclaim:

'How progressive they are in New York! They even have machines for straightening Negroes' hair!'

In most cases such progress concerns them less than an eclipse of the sun on Saturn.

So it becomes evident that, to a Negro, straight hair is a synonym for whiteness, a ticket to respectability. And yet — O paradox! O unsolved mystery! — white women long for curly hair! Can it be a pathological mania, a Freudian complex? Whatever the answer, nine out of ten women with

straight hair would renounce their finest jewels for a head of natural curls.

To attain this wondrous gift which a cruel fate has denied them, they resort to artifice and various devices. There is a popular belief, for example, that when a Negro with a head of springs cuts straight hair, it becomes, as if by magic, curly. Thus at best making the hair curl is like contracting a contagious disease. Certain it is, however, that colored barbers make fortunes on white children.

In addition to this highly efficacious method, there is the application of *bejuco*, castor oil, and other nostrums and concoctions. And finally, curl-papers. The last resort!

Curl-papers are the bugbear of every white child. Her hair is rolled up on strips of tissue paper, usually the wrapping from the bread, and left for several hours, frequently all night. When they are removed, behold a glorious and dazzling lot of curls, of brief and insecure duration, as is the life of roses.

Mother, I remember, after vainly trying castor oil, *bejuco*, and the colored barber's blessing on my incorrigibly straight hair, at last resorted to curlers. Each night, with a patience worthy of a better cause, I sat upon her lap while thirty-five little strips of bread paper were wound into my hair to produce next day thirty-five close-curved ringlets. After which, I went to bed recalling the picture of a fakir on a bed of nails which I had seen in Ross's Almanac, the property of our cook.

This refined torture dated from the day when one of Mother's friends, with the familiarity which friendship grants, spoke of me with pity in her voice:

'The child is not homely, but what a shame she has hair like a summer shower!'

That mention of the summer shower must have struck some responsive chord in the author of my days, for from that time on, bread paper was in its apogee.

Not all Venezuelan mothers, however, have the saintly patience of my own. Many girls have straight hair through-

out the week, only to blossom forth with curls on Sunday. Sometimes, too, in the middle of the week, if their behavior has been bad, they may hear a wrathful maternal voice saying:

'You opened the cupboard without permission! You ate the sweets I intended as a gift! You did not brush your teeth! All right! Come here and get your curlers!'

And girls are not the only ones to use them. Grown women, particularly married women of the smaller towns, offer competition, rolling up their hair when their husbands go to work and taking it down when they are expected back. Although the permanent wave has solved many problems, bread paper is still in vogue among the conservative element too. Curl-papers versus permanents — tradition and modernity.

One other highly important point in this interesting topic is the color of the hair. We suffer from a blond complex. Although there are many shades of blond, from the gold of grain to red, to us anyone with hair lighter than the usual brown is blond. The color scale is not the same as in Europe and the United States. I, for example, pass for a blond at home; in fact I am definitely classified as such. Yet, not so very long ago, one of my fellow students at Columbia University said:

'Because you brunettes . . .'

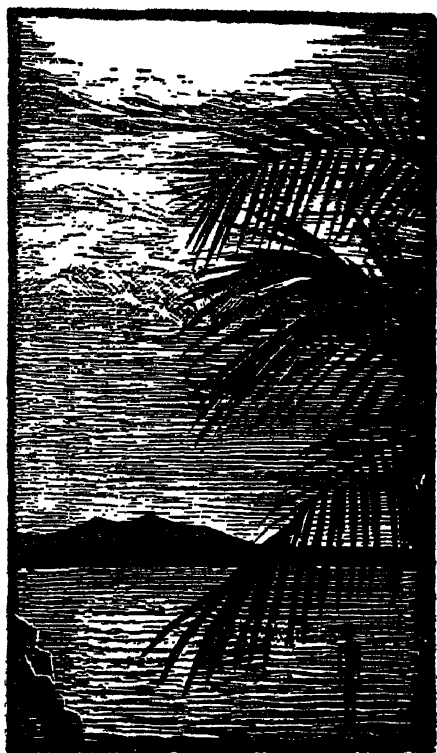
I looked around to see if anyone was with us, and suddenly realizing that she was speaking to me, I felt sick at heart, as if I had been robbed.

From all of which it appears, as the poet says, that all things in life depend on the color of the glass through which you view them.

What Money Is and Isn't

A STRANGE WORLD, this in which we live, where money has come to be synonymous with progress. The more advanced a country is and the greater its material prosperity, the greater the value of its money. Venezuelan currency exchanges at a high rate. Yet to Venezuelans money means little in their homeland. People who roam the world as I have done and find themselves in places wholly new, without friends or knowledge of the language, soon become impressed with the international significance of money. The man who asserted that Esperanto would become the universal language was indeed an optimist. And how mistaken! There is only one language that everybody knows — the language of the gold piece and the banknote. The best interpreter and friend to accompany you on a journey is a wallet filled with dollars and pounds sterling. Sad, but undeniable.

In spite of all that oil and affluence have done to corrupt the Venezuelans, we still remain one of the least material-minded peoples of the world. With a few unfortunate exceptions, apparent chiefly in the cities which have been contaminated by foreign influence, the average Venezuelan lays far more stress on purely personal relationships than on money. He would rather, for example, lose part of his fortune than the right to be regarded as respectable by those with whom he comes in contact. Ninety-nine per cent of our women will always follow the dictates of their hearts and not their heads



in sentimental matters. Rarely, very rarely, does a young woman ask her fiancé what means he has to marry on. Whatever she herself may possess, moreover, is placed unconditionally in her husband's hands, frequently with no thought of what use he may put it to, a material and spiritual submission that was fully backed by Venezuelan law till lately. In spite of reforms intended to alter the legal status of women and their property, it is still essentially the same as under the old system.

A woman's indifference to financial matters is so great that frequently she is not only entirely ignorant of them, but reluctant to ask her husband for details of how her property is handled. Her world is compact of sentiment and fancy, and the only actual money that passes through her hands is what her husband gives her spontaneously for the running of the household. Whatever the amount, her duty is to make it last for thirty days and cover thirty thousand items. If she does not succeed in this, discretion and tact forbid her to ask for more, and often, without her husband's knowing it, she will seek outside means of filling the gap — the classic, time-honored methods of selling cakes and candies, making floral wreaths and sprays, embroidering, knitting.

I am thinking about a woman of fair social status in Caracas who tells fortunes with cards. Oddly enough, her working hours are clearly defined. The fact surprised me, and I asked for an explanation. The answer was that she does not want her husband to know of her activity and therefore receives her clients only while he is at his office. The cards, no doubt, warn her if he is likely to turn up at an unusual moment.

As a result of this indifference to money, many a woman, on her husband's death, finds herself reduced to actual want. She has always considered it unnecessary and lacking in proper feeling for her husband to admit the possibility of death and to make provision against it. Thus, if he has not been sufficiently foresighted, the wife must face hard economic facts

alone. Usually, she feels that her own life has been cut off before its time by her husband's death.

A woman contemplating divorce gives just as little thought to the financial side of her situation. She is concerned only with the sentimental aspects of the ruined marriage. In the great catastrophe which has left her heart in fragments, the heart itself is the only thing that matters. Alimony in Venezuela is a strange phenomenon, a thing unknown and unexplainable, as out of place as coconuts would be on Greenland or a polar bear in La Guaira, the beautiful Caribbean port for Caracas. A friend of mine, on the eve of her divorce, when her husband was offering a settlement of a hundred pesos monthly, haughtily informed him:

'I wouldn't take a cent from you if it were to save my life. You seem to think that money can do anything.'

This woman did not possess one penny of her own and had no idea how she was to live once the divorce was granted. The violence of her feelings, however, made it impossible for her to face the material aspects of her problem. Once her husband had killed her feeling for him — it was an affair of the double standard — she could not tolerate his taking any further interest in her welfare.

Among my acquaintances is a woman still young and handsome who, left a widow, with her husband's affairs involved, has brought up a family of seven children. The oldest is now married; and the second about to be; two boys hold splendid positions; and the other three are at first-class schools. Never, even at night when she came home exhausted from her work, which paid her little, have I heard her utter one word of reproach against her husband for his lack of foresight.

Married life, moreover, is not the only field in which a bland indifference to money is shown. The domestic servant, although she earns but little, thinks about her employer first and only afterward about her wages. If she is earning eighty bolívares a month (about twenty-five dollars) in a household

that she likes and is offered a hundred in another that is less attractive, she will not think of making a change.

A certain family of excellent standing which had suffered reverses had to readjust its budget. The lady of the house summoned one of the maids and told her she would have to leave, since they could no longer afford to pay her.

'Why, Miss Carmen!' she exclaimed. 'Do you think I stay here for the money? I'll gladly work for nothing until you get on your feet again.'

Many a servant, in times of need, lends her wages or her savings to her mistress. In the same way an office worker who has been with a firm for some time will not let an offer of better pay lure him elsewhere. Affection occupies a preponderant place in all our acts. It always has. May it continue ever thus!

Late one afternoon when my cousin Altagracia, who made her home with us for years, and I were going out together, we had hardly left the house when we realized that, due to a change of handbags, so common with the fashions of today, we had come out without any money. She wanted to go back and get some, but I preferred to go on without it. I wanted to try out a little theory which had been developing in my mind; to find out, in fact, just what the limits of Venezuelan gallantry and generosity might be.

We took a streetcar. The conductor came to collect our fare, and we explained that we had no money with us; we would get off if he said so.

'Don't give it a thought, ladies,' he replied. 'Ride as far as you wish; it won't cost you a cent.'

While he was busy with the other passengers, however, we often felt his eye on us. Apparently he was a bit suspicious. He came back to us presently, with a bolívar in his hand.

'Ladies,' he said, 'you will have to have some money. Please accept the loan of this little bolívar. My number is 1239. You may repay it if and when you like.'

We got out at Plaza Bolívar, the center of activity in Ca-

racas. It is a spot of great historical importance, though one of the least attractive parts of the city. Its appearance suggests that successive administrations have by some unexpressed agreement endeavored to see which could make it most ugly, vulgar, and incongruous. Yet in spite of everything, all Caraqueños, like a faithful husband who is still devoted to his aging wife, love that square as a bit of ourselves. In colonial days it was the Plaza de Armas, with massive masonry arcades like those still seen in old Spanish-settled cities. Here cannon shots were fired to celebrate the victories of Carabobo and Junín, so important in the winning of South American independence. Later one of our presidents had the abominable and sacrilegious idea of demolishing the arcades and introducing a sort of pool. With that the vicissitudes of the old plaza began. The only attractive features left today are the towering hundred-year-old trees and the statue of our Liberator mounted on a prancing charger in the center of the square. Once or twice a year delegations from the schools surround this statue of the Father of the Country and sing our national hymn:

*Viva el bravo pueblo
que el yugo lanzó. . . .*

Hail the brave people
Who threw off the yoke. . . .

There also, at Bolívar's feet, these same brave people who threw off the yoke of Spanish oppression have been shot down from time to time for claiming their rights as men. The very stones and trees of Plaza Bolívar have been bathed in blood and consecrated to our history. Naturally we love it, in spite of all its ugliness, as an emblem of our national spirit.

Surrounded by sumptuous public buildings, with the cathedral on one side, it is the recognized headquarters for boot-blacks, the chronically unemployed, and the temporarily idle. It is also the converging point of most Caracas car lines.

Altagracia and I strolled on toward the shopping district.

There we bought various things to be paid for on delivery. Some blue cloth captured my fancy, and I wanted to take three yards of it with me. The clerk spoke to the manager, told me that I might, and asked when to send the bill. I told him at the end of the week, and with his finest smile he answered:

'Very well, miss. But if that seems a little soon, we can send it at the end of the month. There is no hurry, you know — no hurry at all.'

Our shopping finished, the sight and smell of fresh fruit juice made my mouth water. I approached the vendor.

'We should like two glasses of tamarind juice,' I said, 'but we haven't any money. If you will trust us . . .'

We smiled at him. He filled two glasses with the delicious juice, and as he passed them to us he said:

'Please accept this humble offering, ladies. The next time you can pay, but just forget about these tamarinds. Money has no value compared with pleasant people.'

We thanked him and assured him that we would patronize him again. As we walked away I heard him saying to himself:

'That's the way I am — generous and openhanded. I gave them the biggest glasses, too.'

From there we continued to a fashionable bar and ordered two cream punches, a delicious national drink. They came accompanied by two beautiful corsages of orchids and gardenias. At home these flowers are very popular and are seen everywhere. Ours were a gift from friends at a near-by table.

When the time came for us to pay, we asked the waiter for the check and signed our names to it. This practice is so general in Venezuela that he dropped the check into his pocket without a word and went off to wait on other customers.

On the street again, we called a taxi and gave the driver the address of some friends who were expecting us. As we got out I wrote my name and address on a slip of paper and handed it to him.

'Come this evening,' I told him, 'for the money.'

'I can't come tonight, miss,' he replied, 'because I'm taking some people to Macuto. But I'll come tomorrow.'

He tipped his cap and went tooting on his way. Needless horn-blowing is a mild mania with local chauffeurs.

My friends' father opened the door to us. I told him about our adventures.

'God bless our country and its people!' I exclaimed with intense feeling. 'Here we have been out for an afternoon, done some shopping, and enjoyed drinks — without spending a cent or arousing anyone's suspicions, all by the mere miracle that we look and are respectable. Where else could such a thing have happened?'

'That is why work plays a secondary rôle,' he replied. 'That is why Venezuela has to count on foreign countries for its food requirements, why we produce only a little more than half of what we eat, why we have no well-developed industries of our own.'

'What,' I asked him, 'should we gain from well-developed industries, strict discipline, and great productive enterprise if it cost us our epicurean attitude toward life? We don't want to become slaves to money and exchange our feelings for our interests. As it is, we are building our future soundly though slowly. Some day will find us great in material things and self-supporting. But we shall be so without having sacrificed any of our spirit, which is the finest thing we have.'

'Speech for the opening of Congress in the land of sympathy and credit,' was *Altagracia's* remark as she entered the flower-filled patio to greet the girls.

She was right. Venezuela is the land of credit. Everything is bought and sold without taking a penny from the pocket. A man's word is usually as good as a contract with notary's signature, seal, and all. Brokers, known by the quaint name of *corredores públicos* or public runners, and commission merchants in general transact their business by the given word. And seldom are they cheated. People, like dogs who bite the

man who fears them, are far more likely to cheat one who shows a lack of confidence than one who is trusting. A house in Venezuela can be outfitted entirely on credit, from cooking pots to radio. It is not unusual to hear a credit purchaser telephoning to a store like this:

'This is Guillermo Pérez. . . . How have you been? . . . Good! How's business? . . . That's fine! I called to speak about that little bill of mine for the odds and ends I bought, the dining-room set and phonograph. Would you mind sending it on the fifteenth of next month instead of on the first? I've had to get the children off to Europe and can't do anything about it just now. Next month, though, without fail; so don't forget to send it.'

To which the other end replies:

'Don't worry, sir. We'll send it on the fifteenth. Hope the children have a good time abroad.'

A woman whose telephone was about to be cut off for failure to pay the bill, called up the company:

'I've just received your letter saying you are going to disconnect my phone and am very much surprised. I'm sure you wouldn't do that to me. You wouldn't be so heartless. . . . Yes, I know I'm behind in my payments; but let me tell you what happened. You see, my husband has gone on a long trip and forgot to give me the keys of the dresser where the money is. I've tried to open it with every key I've got, but none of them works. You can imagine how mortified I am, because the money for the light bill is also there. Don't you know some agreeable person in the electric company whom I can call up and explain the situation to — someone intelligent and understanding like yourself? The very minute my husband returns, I'll get the keys, open the dresser, and send the money. . . . Oh, thank you, thank you! I knew you wouldn't leave me without a phone.'

People in good standing sign slips in the bars and restaurants of their clubs for as much as four or five hundred bolívares a month.

A young man owed a sizable amount at the bar of his club. He was a little short, and he decided to let the bill run another month. Some ten or fifteen days later the club sent a collector to call on him. Infuriated, the young man seized the phone and let loose his anger on the treasurer.

'What kind of club are you running, anyway?' he asked. 'Don't you even know how to treat respectable people? What's the idea of sending me bills all the time when you know I can't pay them? . . . I'm going to complain to the board of governors and see if they can't get a little system into the way the outfit is run. And listen! Don't send any more collectors around here until I tell you to.'

It is superfluous to add that he received an apology.

That odd creature, the paying guest, is unknown in Venezuela. When an invitation is extended, it includes everything. The guest has neither the right nor the opportunity to pay for anything. Families even invite each other to spend whole months at country houses or the shore, with all their children, servants, and pets included.

If a woman takes a streetcar or a bus and there is some male friend or acquaintance in it who sees her, even from a distance, he will pay her fare. I, for example, once made four streetcar trips in a single day without paying one fare.

All this explains why Venezuelan women visiting the United States sometimes hesitate about accepting invitations from feminine friends to go where money is certain to be spent. They never know whether they are expected to pay their own way or whether someone else will do it. A little dark-eyed student who had been invited to dinner at El Morocco was definitely worried.

'I can't make up my mind,' she said, 'whether to go or not. I should love to see the place, but . . . The other day an American girl friend invited me to lunch, and when the check came I was expected to pay my share. That time it was only a dollar. If I have to pay my way at El Morocco, I'll be broke the whole month.'

Tipping is another phenomenon almost unknown in Venezuela. To be sure, in cities like Caracas, Valencia, and Maracaibo, where cafés, restaurants, bars, and clubs abound, with foreign waiters in attendance, the practice is beginning to appear. It is still wholly voluntary, regulated by no fixed rule, and entirely at the discretion of the customer, who may leave no tip at all without anything very dreadful happening. In towns and smaller cities no one tips, and no one — absolutely no one — has any thought of asking or expecting it.

No one is tip-conscious. No monetary reward is expected for good service; the hand is extended not for a tip, but for a friendly grasp. The finest gesture that the so-called aristocrat can make toward a man or woman of the people is to offer his hand. The one who is so honored will not only be delighted, but will talk about it to his friends:

'Mr. So-and-So is very democratic. He doesn't hesitate to shake hands with us poor folks.'

The highways are the best place to see the system at work. There are usually many curves, and since our drivers love to speed, blowouts are common. Whenever a car breaks down along the road, eight out of every ten who pass will stop to ask if they can help. I could not count all the times when professional chauffeurs and private motorists as well have helped us in an emergency on the Caracas-La Guaira highway, and whenever Father has tried to pay them for their trouble, the answer has always been given in a hearty tone:

'You offend me, sir. I didn't offer to help for money — just out of kindness.'

An Englishman staying at a country hotel handed the maid a tip of ten bolívares on his departure. He was in his car and ready to drive away when he saw her running out breathless and perspiring, clasping a handful of coins.

'Mister! Mister!' she called. 'Here's the money. I got you the smallest change I could.'

Her one thought was that the strange 'mooseer' who spoke

no word of Spanish had given her the ten bolívars to change, and that was what she had done.

With us it is offensive to count one's change. It is never done, at least not in the presence of the other party. To do so puts his good faith and honesty in question. You receive the little handful of coins, give it a quick glance, perhaps, and drop it in your pocket or your change purse. Strangely enough, despite the practice, you will very seldom be short-changed.

In general, we have a certain reticence about discussing money. Very often you hear one person tell another:

'You'll let me know, won't you, Mr. So-and-So, when to come about that little matter?' Or, 'I have that little matter ready when you want it.'

'That little matter' is a very common expression. We use it whenever we wish to give out an air of discreet mystery. We speak of the man or woman involved in 'that little matter,' for example, or of 'that little matter' that happened yesterday. But no one is mystified by it.

Since laborers' wages are never stipulated on an hourly basis and no one knows for sure what any single job will pay, strange things happen. Once long ago, when I was quite little, I saw Mother, in her rocker in the gallery, looking with a puzzled air at a farmer who stood before her, apparently waiting for something. Twisting his straw hat in his hands, he stared down at his *alpargatas*.

'No,' Mother insisted, 'you are the one to say how much the work is worth.'

'Whatever you say, lady, whatever you say,' the heartless fellow replied, still studying his feet.

While he was seeking counsel from his *alpargatas*, Mother seemed to be consulting the potted ferns. After a period of silence, she faced the problem once again:

'But tell me, at least,' she said, 'how many hours you spent gathering it in the woods.'

'Oh, just a little while — a morning or so. And a spell one afternoon. A little while now and again.'

'And how long is a little while?'

'Well, a little while is just a little bit of time. It might be long and it might be short . . . depending . . . It all depends on how you feel inside.'

Mother turned her questioning gaze to a handful of twisted roots he had laid on the table. Then she saw Father coming through the door. At last I discovered the cause of all this sea of vagaries in which the farmer and the author of my days were floundering. Half serious and half amused, she turned to Father and asked:

'How much do you think I ought to pay him?'

'Whom and for what?' asked Father, who habitually dwells in a world of his own.

'Him — for the child's *bejuco*.' This is the wonder-working plant that makes straight hair curl.

For once, Father was a total failure in the rôle of arbitrator. With a rapid glance that took in my head, the innocent cause of all the trouble, the farmer, the *bejuco*, and even the potted ferns and a tiny bit of sky above, he turned toward his study, saying:

'I think that straight hair is very becoming to little Olga.'

Obviously, it would be no easy matter for an authority on labor legislation to establish a scale of wages for farmers who hunt magic herbs for hair.

Going Places and Doing Things

EVERYONE is curious to know how we amuse ourselves in South America. What, they wonder, do those strange people do for fun? It's simple enough. We amuse ourselves like anybody else, admitting the while, parenthetically, that the whole world is short on pastime, with popular imagination in this respect the victim of a pernicious anemia.

Our amusements are those of any other country, but with one peculiarity. Others find their fun *outside*; we find ours mostly *within*.

First of all, we have the movies. We are devotees of adjectives, superlatives, and dithyrambs. In certain individuals the harmless mania is particularly marked — in mothers speaking of their children, naturally, and in lovers proclaiming their devotion. Impresarios of public entertainment also suffer from it. This surprises no one. 'You must blow your own horn' has come to be, with us, a basic premise. As a result, any statement that is highly flavored with adjectives is automatically reduced by half in the mind of the listener. In the case of impresarios, especially of moving pictures, this drastic reduction falls far short of being enough. One should credit no more than half of half of what is claimed, or better, only half of that! The imagination of these good gentlemen is ultra-supercolossal.

No film is ever advertised in terms consistent with its quality. God forbid! If it were, no one would dream of going to



it. After the customary discounting, it would appear an abstract minus quantity.

The time-honored grading of films that is regularly employed in the United States is practically unknown to us. It has been taken up to some slight extent in Caracas recently, but no one has bothered to explain the significance of it, and hence it conveys little or nothing. Venezuela is not grade-conscious like the United States. The only grades we know are the grades a student needs for his degree, the grades of fever shown by a thermometer, and the grades of — say, fervor, which no thermometer can show. The business of grading eggs or milk, for example, is not for us. Not yet.

Never is a film advertised merely by name, dates, and actors. Rather:

'The most stupendous achievement of the Eighth Art. An unforgettable spectacle that will set you quivering with horror, joy, and anger. A veritable gem of modern moving pictures.'

'The Downhill Donkey,' let us say, is one such gay production which might be advertised, in fine print and parentheses, as 'Grade F' in North America. The announcement of it will fill a whole page in the daily papers, for in Venezuela, as everywhere else, fame is won by advertising, and impresarios spend real fortunes on publicity. Each strives to outdo the others, and their lives are spent in lawless rivalry, with magazines and papers the major beneficiaries. If all exhibitors were to agree to use a stipulated space, less money would be spent, and the result would be the same. But then the periodicals would be the losers, with sad results for us poor journalists.

When the public buys tickets to a movie, it is torn between the exhibitors' publicity and its own skepticism. There is no telling what to expect. Hence any film is a surprise. Going to the movies is like roulette — you never know just where the ball will drop. Anyone who has been promised a sensation is bound to be surprised when he finds himself bored; if a

sensation is not only promised but delivered, that is the biggest surprise of all.

Movies in Venezuela are not shown continuously. The admission fee buys a view of one film, regardless of grade; there is also a newsreel, but then — good night. This is not quite fair; I was forgetting that there is a fifteen-minute intermission too. At possibly its most exciting moment the film is stopped, the lights come on, gradually or with a flash, according to the impresario's caprice, and boys come down the aisles to sell chocolate.

For many people the intermission is the high moment of the show. Think of it! Fifteen whole minutes in which to talk with friends, to see who has come with whom, to smoke a cigarette — but that must be done outside — to look at the women's costumes and see how the men are looking. Fifteen minutes in which to emerge from the anonymity of darkness into the realm of light!

The showings at different hours are not equally important. The first is for children. The *vespertina*, at five o'clock, is for the formally engaged, who come accompanied by mother, aunt, sister, or little brother; that is also the time for well-bred girls of the old school, white, charming, distant, cool of manner. Altagracia prefers the *vespertina*. The intermediate showing, which begins at seven, is attended by people in mourning who do not wish to be conspicuous, by couples who may be shady or perhaps just not officially engaged as yet, and by families in good standing but reduced circumstances who have neither new clothes to show nor the five bolívares which are the price of the fashionable performances.

The last, at nine o'clock, is for family parties, the world of fashion, marriageable daughters who are not bespoken, night owls, and the generally emancipated, as well as for the wealthy and those supposed to be wealthy, since it is the most expensive. That is the time to display the new gown, the darling hat just received from Paris, the sweetheart, and financial affluence.

Different films are presented at any one day's performances. The one shown at nine rates a whole page of publicity; from that peak a film descends to the *vespertina*, with a quarter page, and finally, in complete decadence, to the common grave which is the intermediate or the *matinée* performance and warrants only a stingy little epitaph of an advertisement that gives nothing but title and time. *Vanitas vanitatum!* as the disillusioned Preacher said.

In the smaller towns movies are far more enjoyable than in Caracas. Performances are usually presented out-of-doors, and the weather is always mild. Surrounded by low walls, the movie houses have the finest roof imaginable — a tropical sky of magic beauty, with moon, stars, Southern Cross, and all. One night Altagracia and I watched a raging Arctic blizzard with polar bears, ice-bound ships, seals, Eskimos, and all the frozen seasonings, while the heavens above seemed about to drop from the weight of stars, crickets chirped, and the intoxicating odor of magnolias filled the air. Grown blasé by travel, books, and fashion, we savored the incongruity and smiled in superiority, but the general public, farmers, muleteers, cowboys, travelers, Venezuelans all, exposed the virgin purity of their responsive souls to their emotions, and some even suffered a chill. A few dogs which had sneaked in among the seats barked at the polar bears. Several poor children who were watching, on horseback, outside, were excited by the snowstorm and produced a red one of their own with petals from the roses blooming on the wall; their perfumed shower caressed our faces. Suddenly, beside me, a thick but pleasant voice spoke with a countrified accent:

'Will the young lady please shove over just a little?'

A farmer who had arrived late was looking for a seat. Frequently, in small-town theaters, the seats are only benches. The fellow must have hesitated a long time before venturing to bother us, but weariness at last had overcome timidity. Hat in hand, he waited for us to shove over and then sat down on the very end of the bench. When finally he had forgotten

we were there, he gave free rein to his emotions. We watched him suffer, rejoice, worry, and laugh with the various episodes of the film. For him shouting children, barking dogs, the cries of vendors, stars, scents, had all ceased to exist.

Meanwhile, squeezed into her seat, Altagracia was grumbling about democracy and the absurd idea of rubbing elbows with anyone who came along. But all at once she stopped complaining and began to smile quietly. Her eyes had fallen on a pair of lovers, a half-breed muleteer and a dark-eyed country girl. They were holding hands in silence, and in their faces were reflected the beauty of the starlit night and all the fondness in the world. Southern Cross, rose petals, and magnolias seemed quite in keeping with that idyll unfolding on the bench of a country movie.

Another of our fashionable diversions is the dance places which are found only in the cities. Here again Altagracia's views and mine are at odds. She describes them grandiloquently as sinks of iniquity, while to me they are only spots of total boredom. Naturally, I think I am nearer right than she. In such places the only thing people lose is time, and that most pitifully. With very few exceptions Venezuelan 'dancings' are the saddest bores in all the world. They are so tiresome, in fact, that they must be advertised as vociferously as the films and have their names changed every few months. When the public ceases to attend, even after several 'gala occasions,' they redecorate, hunt up a fresh name, and advertise the opening of the newly christened establishment in the daily papers.

Along the street one playboy asks another who has been away for a while:

'Are you going to the celebration at the Monte Carlo, the new dance hall?'

'I don't know the place. Where is it?'

'On the Plaza de la Misericordia — the lower corner, where the Alción used to be.'

'I never heard of the Alción, but I remember the Bella Vista in that square.'

'Oh, the Bella Vista's ancient history. Afterward it was the Samán, then the Morocco, Nice, Pikío, Alción, and now the Monte Carlo. It had a couple of other names as well, but they kept them only a few weeks. Now it's the Monte Carlo, really the last word.'

These anemic pastimes are not all we have. The entertainments that are typically our own, that really spring from our racial background and represent something of our true spirit — these are truly entertaining.

First of all, we have the theater, the native theater, reflecting with the fidelity of a mirror the life, ideas, language, passions, and manners of the Venezuelan lower classes. Comedy and farce are its fare. In all Latin America there is no dramatic tradition but the purely vernacular or local, except for Florencio Sánchez, an Uruguayan playwright who made a career in Argentina, and Lobarden, the well-known Argentine. Settings are poor, naïve, worse than bad, but the productions have an enchanting grace and spontaneity. The high priest of this type of play is Rafael Guinán, a son of the people, a misanthrope, and a great though scarcely known artist. Its vocabulary is vigorous, abounding in double meanings, outspoken and even vulgar, but behind it all is the distinctive character of Venezuela, the soul of its people, ingenuous, vibrant, passionate, and pure.

Respectable Venezuelan women do not attend native plays. They would die first. A few of the emancipated go, but when they do, they wear inconspicuous dark clothes and festoon their hats with their very heaviest veils. They arrive before the play begins and do not leave until the house is empty. In the intermissions they bury their noses in their programs, not figuratively, but actually, for fear of being spotted.

Altagracia has never been to such a play, and when Guinán is mentioned she insists that she cannot place the name. She does not know what she is missing. I have never enjoyed

myself so much as at certain native shows, despite the fact that I have often had to do my laughing at home afterward, because I was ashamed to be seen laughing at the time. Mother must certainly have thought her dear child had lost her mind when, after attending the theater, I burst into loud guffaws alone at midnight in my peaceful room.

From time to time we also have opera, Russian ballet, concerts, evening entertainments, lectures, exhibitions, and the rest. In the world of sports there are tennis, golf, riding, rowing, swimming, mountain climbing, sailing, bicycling, automobilng, hiking, boxing, baseball, football, basketball, and racing. In fact we know and engage in every sport imaginable, and we do not perform too badly. In 1942, for example, we won the world amateur baseball championship, with the breath-taking score of 14-0, as I recall, against North America, represented by a Cuban team. That victory turned Caracas topsy-turvy. Employers let their help off for the afternoon, flags waved, loud-speakers blared; the whole city wore its Sunday best. With the madness of anticipated triumph, we saw Negroes, whites, and Indians meeting on equal terms and embracing in the streets in a wild outburst of democracy.

On that particular afternoon, I remember, I had decided to undergo the rigors of a permanent wave, in the hope of spiking Altagracia's guns. My cousin never misses a chance to twit me about my straight hair. I did not intend to miss anything about the game, however; so I carried a small radio and held it on my lap throughout my martyrdom to beauty. Following the plays as they came through, with tremendous excitement, I must have leaped in my chair. Finally the hairdresser, who was a Cuban, could contain himself no longer.

'Look, miss,' he said, 'if you keep moving about you're going to get your hair burned off.'

My motives were confused by then between patriotism and permanent. I looked him up and down.

'Listen, Mr. Hairdresser,' I retorted, 'complain if you want to, but we are going to win the game!'

All sports, of course, in Venezuela as well as South America in general, take on the local color of the section where they are practiced. We adapt them to suit our fancy. Pancho Segura, the Ecuadorian who has won several championships in North America, plays tennis two-handed. A Brazilian team once reached the Olympic soccer semi-finals with a back-center who preferred to go barefoot. An Argentine who made a sensational Olympic cross-country run had his hair impeccably brilliantined. Our people sometimes play soccer in straw hats, swim in the simplest costume — none at all — and bait bulls in wing tie and starched shirt. Why not?

A sport indulged in by many men, one that is most legitimately our own, is fishing. Fishing in Venezuela is quite a different sport from what it is in some other countries. A fisherman who will not sally forth without seven-league boots, bamboo rod, flies, pipe, creel, lunch, camera, what not, is scarcely Venezuelan. The type does occur, but it is not numerous. As a rule our fishermen carry no equipment of any kind save a pole, a hook, a little worm or two, a repertoire of songs, and a good store of philosophy.

One of the most spectacular and dramatic forms of the sport is deep-sea fishing for sharks. Although it is legally forbidden to dynamite them, this is a favorite method. Once, despite Mother's concern for my life and the flutters of Altigracia and various aged aunts about my reputation, I went on a fishing trip on the treacherous waters of the Caribbean. In a little launch we headed for the open sea. Once past the whitecaps, we sighted the steely fin of our first shark. I felt a sudden longing for the shore. The others had already filled the open belly of a smaller fish with dynamite and were sewing it up as if after an appendectomy. When it was finished, Ramón, my cousin who was running the expedition, threw it into the water. The shark headed at once for the victim of their surgery and reaching it, rolled over on his back and swallowed it.

'That won't set very well,' Ramón remarked slyly.

He was right. It couldn't have set worse. We soon heard a tremendous noise, and the air was filled with blood-flecked spray. In no time at all the launch was empty. All of us but my friend Carmen and me had jumped into the sea.

'Get out the frying pan!' shouted one of the boys.

It began to rain fish. The explosion of the dynamite had burst their tympanums, and their dead bodies rose to the surface around us. What must Neptune have thought in his moist depths? Personally, I did not care. Heading for the floating fish and for the young men who had gone overboard among them were two sharks, cutting the water with their upright fins. They had been attracted, I suppose, by the odor of dead fish, although I must confess complete ignorance of deep-sea olfactory systems. Or perhaps it was some mysterious sixth sense. Whatever the explanation, I gave a terror-stricken yell to warn my friends.

I had expected that they would make a dash for the launch and thank me for having saved their lives. Instead, one of them began talking to the sharks.

'Who gave you a candle for this funeral?' he inquired, using a back-country expression to ask who had invited it to the feast.

I saw strange things that day. Unmoved, my friends went right on with their fishing, as if from the deck of a brigantine. They respected the sharks' share of the slaughter, and the sharks apparently respected theirs; they divided the fish like Franciscan monks sharing bread and salt. All went well until one of the sharks took a notion to seize a fish that Ramón had grabbed. Neither was willing to give in. Ramón finally drove the shark away by slapping him with another fish.

Carmen, who lives on the coast, assured me that sharks will not attack human beings unless they cannot find anything else to eat. Man is thus a meal in time of need. She was getting bored with merely looking on and waving to me, she, too, went overboard.

Some time later my friends returned to the launch, and we headed for the shore. Carmen was curious to know why I hadn't jumped in with the others. She said it was a pity to miss such splendid fun.

'I'm sorry, too,' I told her without blushing. 'But you know I'm allergic to sharks. They make me sneeze. Had it not been for that, I'd have gone in right off.'

Allergies cover a lot of cases!

Carmen made no reply, but moved up to the bow. There, with her splendid athletic build and her black hair drying in the sun, she seemed a graceful untamed siren from the Caribbean. Neither sharks nor sea set off any allergy in her.

If fishing is exciting, hunting is no less so. At home we hunt all kinds of game, from doves which small boys kill with slingshots to deer and so-called lions and tigers of the South American variety, which experts bring down with guns or lances. In South America, tigers are only jaguars, but good sport all the same.

Nothing is more exciting than a night of tiger-hunting on the plains. The hunters conceal themselves in the bushes around a waterhole, load their guns, and lie waiting perhaps for hours. The guide has placed them down wind so that the tiger will not be warned off by the hated human scent. No one may smoke, move, speak, or make any sound at all. Nothing but silent, patient waiting.

This immobility and silence offer a rich opportunity for communion with one's inner self, to listen to the eloquent voices of night and nature.

Tropical nights are full of sounds, voices, and sonorous silences. The shrill chirping of the crickets is suddenly interrupted by the cicada's nocturnal song. The clockbird sounds the hour; the road-watcher utters its ominous cry; a lizard slips away. The leaves whisper in the trees; there is a murmur in the thickets; far away a bull is bellowing; beetles scratch the trunks of trees; a monkey shrieks; wild rabbits

nibble their evening meal; and many kinds of night birds lament or sing.

In his thicket the hunter feels as if he were slowly merging into the soil, until at last he seems a part of the productive, fertile earth of which he was born and which will receive him when he dies.

Suddenly, amid the shining, phosphorescent grubs and the tiny gleams which are the eyes of animals, two great lights approach the thicket. The tiger has arrived. The hunter's heart begins to pound.

During the last century this sort of hunting was scorned by hairy-chested hunters. My father tells me that his grandfather, a romantic grand seigneur with flowing beard, a poet, a great and daring lover, and of course a politician, would have died of shame at killing a tiger or a lion with firearms. Such an act would have dishonored the family of one of the fathers of Venezuelan independence!

The lion of South America is the puma. It is smaller than a true lion, just as the jaguar is smaller than the Asiatic tiger; the jaguar, moreover, is spotted, whereas the tiger of Asia is striped. The puma looks a good deal like a lion, but it has no mane.

Father remembers seeing as a child fifteen enormous skins of pumas that my grandfather had killed with a lance. I wish I had seen them, too, but I know that if they had lasted until my day the deadly labors of insects and rodents would certainly have left them looking like so many colanders. It is better to imagine them in prime condition. One does well to avoid material evidence at times.

It seems that my grandfather used his lance only against large-beasts. With legitimate disdain, he left smaller ones for servants. How noble menfolks are!

Deer are hunted unromantically nowadays, by car. Our plains are like huge golf greens or billiard tables, and a car can drive over them in almost any direction. There is no need to follow highways. The plains are a green motorist's paradise.

On these plains large herds of deer appear from time to time. On sighting them the hunter speeds toward his chosen quarry, and the chase is on. At first the fleeing deer has an advantage, but gradually fear and weariness cause him to lose ground, until, utterly exhausted, he stands or drops, temporarily paralyzed, his legs like sticks, his great eyes staring. Occasionally deer are hunted with lassos, either on horseback or from a car; to take one this way is no mean achievement. Sometimes they are killed with guns or rifles, and sometimes, too, when they are caught alive, they are allowed to escape.

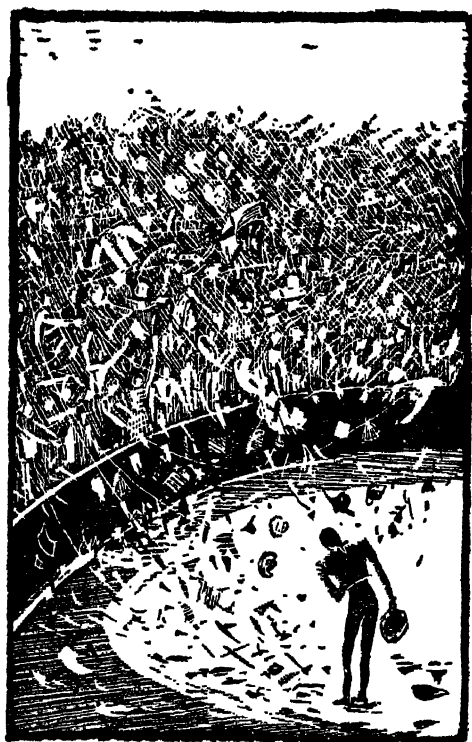
At home in Caracas we have three deer from the plains. The buck was lassoed by my brother on horseback before it was full grown. Later, on another expedition, inspired by what I may call philanthropic motives, he resolved to catch a doe and did. The third deer, the result of the philanthropy, was born early in the morning one first of January; so we named him New Year. He is very tame and eats from our visitors' hands. Sometimes also he escapes from his inclosure and ruins Mother's roses. He shows a marked predilection, too, for ladies' lace handkerchiefs and gentlemen's shoe-strings. Each to his taste!

Cocks and Bulls

COCKFIGHTS are a highly colorful spectacle, savage, stirring, wild, and violent. No descendant of the ancient Greek pancratium, they are a form of 'catch as catch can' which originated in Spain. The setting is neither ring nor amphitheater, but the center of a rough circle called a pit, such a raucous spot that it has come to be synonymous with any great commotion.

The breeding of fighting cocks is a recognized profession, and a man may devote a lifetime to it. The breeders love their birds with a tender passion and watch their defeats and victories with an almost paternal feeling.

A pastime of the common people, the cockfight is hardly elevating, but once when, with what Altagracia calls my absurd ideas, I induced her and our friend Ramiro Casona to go to a cockfight with me, we had a splendid time. The audience consisted of country people in their Sunday best, muleteers, vagabonds, and a sprinkling of respectable men in hunting clothes, with wide felt hats and high laced boots. There were not more than ten country women, for women do not enjoy that kind of occasion. I too, watching at close range, found it little to my liking, for it is a bloody business; but taken as a whole and from a distance, it is picturesque and full of color. The dressed-up country folk, with broad hats of felt or straw and colored kerchiefs, and their emotion, shouts, and wild enthusiasm, are very interesting.



When we arrived they were just strewing the pit with fresh sand. A farmer with a thick and drooping mustache à la General Gómez was counting his winnings from his bets on the preceding fight. He jingled the coins in his plaid kerchief and murmured with satisfaction:

'Another bit of luck like that, and I'll buy my wife a goat.'

The shouts of the crowd announced that the contestants had arrived. An old man with white hair, holding an enormous white cock beneath his arm, worked his way through the crowd and took his place at one side of the sanded circle. There was also a self-conscious half-breed with a red cock on his shoulder. The two men looked each other over silently. With the anxious pride of a mother seeing her son in a street fight for the first time, they placed their respective cocks in the center of the pit and withdrew to either side. There was a strident 'kee-kee-ree-keeeee' from the white cock and a shout from a bystander:

'Four bits on the singer, before he starts!'

'Covered!' the man with the drooping mustache cried.

The rival cocks faced each other, their combs erect. As their owners had done, they eyed each other for a moment before attacking in a savage rush. Their beaks were keen as swords, and their spurs tore hostile flesh as cruelly as a lance. The white cock's feathers were soon dyed purple, and the patches of blood on the red cock seemed redder still. Feathers mingled with the shouts and the cries of frenzied betting in the air.

The faces of the breeders were wonderful to watch. The old man soothed his cock with a mother's tenderness, whispering in its ear between the rounds as he wiped blood from its head. The half-breed, on the other hand, urged his on with loud, enthusiastic shouts; when he saw him in the clutches of the foe, he cursed and berated him in Rabelaisian language.

I should have liked to see the old man's cock, the white one, win, but its opponent sank a spur into its head; it left an enormous gash. The old man took a mouthful of vinegar and

standing near the bird spurted it over the injury, in an attempt to bring it to. The wounded bird shook itself vigorously and raised its head, which had been resting in the sand.

'Desperate ills take desperate remedies,' remarked Ramiro, who was feeling philosophical.

Altagracia had her hands before her face, but I suspect she was peeking through her fingers.

I watched the outcome of the fight in the faces of the old man and the half-breed. In spite of love and vinegar, the white cock rose no more. The winner raised a joyful shout. He was master of the ring and bursting with pride, like husbands with the motto, 'In this house I am the only cock that crows.'

There were tears in the eyes of the old white-haired man and a smile on the face of the befuddled half-breed.

'The goat! The goat!' the man with the General Gómez mustache cried with frenzied joy, as he dropped more coins into his plaid kerchief.

Although cockfights always have a note of tragedy, it is rare in bullfights. At the risk of being criticized as cruel, I must confess that bullfights are to me the most entertaining and exciting of outdoor spectacles. Inhabitants of Nordic countries consider them an evidence of barbarism. Many Nordic doings strike us as barbarous, but we reserve our judgment. Every people has its tastes, and we should not criticize those with which we are not thoroughly familiar. What purpose do bulls, cows, and stock in general serve? They are allowed to exist only as the slaves of man, to furnish him with meat, milk, hides, cheese, butter, and other things. Since they serve as purveyors of milk, shoes, handbags, and such, why should they not supply excitement, too? I have never, for example, seen an Englishman with a *filet mignon* in front of him saddened by thoughts of the horned beast from which it came. Yet the eater must be thoroughly aware that before appearing on his plate in a mausoleum of lettuce and fried potatoes the flesh had gone under the slaughterer's ax. About

that no Englishman feels any qualm. Why, then, should he worry if instead of being sent to a mechanical and obscure death in a slaughterhouse, an animal is permitted to die in broad daylight — exalted, attacking man, his enemy, and almost famous for his little moment, with the added chance of going down in history if he is really valiant? Music was written to honor Poca-Pena, the bull that killed Granero, the great *torero* of Spain; his remains were embalmed and placed in a museum. Where will you find the victim of a slaughterhouse honored thus, like the Venus de Milo!

Lovers of sportsmanship should realize that the bull also has his chances. That is why so many fighters have been killed or wounded. Foreigners often imagine that the bulls are doped before appearing in the ring. Obviously they have never seen them emerging from the pen. What force and strength they show! If they fail to rush to the attack, they are immediately driven back.

Although women stay away from cockfights, they attend bullfights in vast numbers, their bright dresses bringing splashes of color to the ring. Wealthy women of fashion occupy the boxes, across the front of which they sometimes hang Manila shawls. Forgetting their customary reserve and modesty, they reach a state of ecstasy, applauding, shouting, rising to their feet, protesting, flushed or pallid with excitement. On days when a famous fighter is appearing they carry flowers and after a fine bit of work toss them into the ring as he passes by.

Bullfighting in Venezuela and elsewhere in South America is a highly lucrative profession. A good *torero* can earn from four to seven thousand bolívares in a single afternoon; that is, twelve hundred dollars to eighteen hundred dollars. When one stops to think that a bank clerk makes scarcely four hundred bolívares a month for arising at seven in the morning and wearing himself out in office chairs, while a laborer earns only from one hundred and twenty to one hundred and fifty by endless sweat and toil, it is easy to understand that there are hun-

dreds of devotees who dream of becoming *toreros*. After a Sunday bullfight, it is entirely possible that every lad of the common people fancies himself as a new Belmonte. Later, he will resign himself once more to his bootblack's box until better times arrive; but he will have had his moment of dream of eagerness and greatness. Bullfighting is a profession for the lower classes. Aristocrats do not enter it.

The world's great *toreros* have often started as stable boys or sweepers in the ring and have reached the peak of human vanity, dressing like princes and driving in gold-encrusted coaches or magnificent cars, surrounded by a court of servants and admirers.

In South America a famous bullfighter is the counterpart of a moving-picture star or a football or baseball hero in North America. He is the recipient of quantities of fan mail, proposals of marriage, and highly profitable offers from advertising agencies. His name is spoken with affection, and his exploits in his latest fight are known and discussed in the farthest corners of the country. Radios, phonographs, and young throats repeat to satiation songs that are written in his honor. Everyone in Venezuela knows 'When Rubito came from Lima . . .' Rubito was a great Venezuelan fighter who received his name by reason of blond hair.

A Mexican told me that once in his country an eccentric millionaire kidnapped a bullfighter and took him to his ranch. In Venezuela we do not go quite that far. As a matter of fact, a sharp dividing-line sets apart not only bullfighters, but all public entertainers. A famous fighter is invited to public places, but never to the private houses of the real aristocrats. Women show him all honor in the ring, shower him with flowers and even throw him kisses, but they will not dance with him or appear with him in public except in the rare case where he bears the mark of positive genius. Men of social standing will be his friends. They will carouse with him and will introduce him to their mistresses, but never to their

wives. Aside from this distinction, the bullfighter is the idol of all the people, with a real place in their affection.

Although bullfighting is exclusively a profession of the people, there are many aristocrats who practice it in private. Almost any ranch owner can keep a bull at bay for his quarter of an hour, and these amateur fights are a regular feature of ranch life.

Once as we were driving across the plains, Father stopped the car to confront a range cow that had crossed the road. He took off his coat, balanced on his toes, and shouted defiance at the beast, which charged as if shot from a catapult.

'Are you sure you packed the iodine and cotton?' Mother asked me in her deliberate voice.

I was tongue-tied with astonishment, for Father was showing off a gift that I had not known he possessed. Happily, he returned to the car on his own feet and without need of iodine. Basking in the admiration of his family, he waved farewell to the cow, which showed an urge to travel with us.

Not all Venezuelan men know — if I may make a pun — how to cow a bull or even how to cow a cow. An uncle of mine on the maternal side was invited to a rodeo at Father's ranch. There was a *joropo*, singing, a barbecue, and altogether wondrous goings-on. Poor Uncle watched from the branches of a little tree. At the beginning of the roundup a cow had charged him, and he, instead of giving her a wallop, had headed for the tree. The cow took her stand below and waited, sharpening her horns against the trunk. When the rodeo was over, our *torero* was discovered on his perch, carefully calculating the inches between his trembling body and bossy's horns.

Bullfighting is a difficult and exacting art. It requires a specific stature, a certain type of build, great agility and speed, perfect vision, wonderful physique, constant practice, great valor and coolness, and an elaborate technique. Like ballet dancers, good fighters begin as children, and the career

is short. The only fighters who stay active beyond their youth are those who are compelled by circumstances, usually financial. Obviously their path is not all strewn with roses.

The bullfight public is capricious, clamorous and ungrateful, with faces as shifting as the Caribbean Sea. It may be calm, agitated, excited, and abusive, all within a few minutes. I have witnessed this dreadful fickleness often.

All of us but Mother are devoted to the bulls. On Sundays when a fight is on, we go to the ring en masse. Father is the most enthusiastic of devotees and also the most critical. We occupy a box or cheaper seats, according to our financial situation at the moment, but always we manage to be there, hungry for excitement and ready to go wild with enthusiasm. When the bull enters the arena we all are hypnotized. I doubt whether we would notice it if the stands caught fire.

'Watch that *verónica*! What a *molinete*!' Father cries, for he knows the name and technique of every pass.

'Bravo! Bravo!' exclaim Altagracia and I, who are not so technical, but appreciate fine points instinctively.

I remember a fight at which my cousin and I must have shouted well-nigh a thousand bravos. Father's were innumerable, for the performance was sensational. A friend who had come with us threw first his hat, then the chair pad, programs, and a copy of *El Universal* into the ring (*El Universal* is the newspaper I write for, by the way). The only reason he threw nothing more was that there was nothing more to throw. Yet he is a very temperate person. Eventually no pad was left on any chair; all had been hurled into the ring as evidence of the crowd's enthusiasm. Women tossed flowers, kisses, handkerchiefs, flaming glances, and no end of sighs; men cast down their hats, coats, vests, and walking-sticks. One excited spectator near us, beginning with his cushion, parted with his hat, jacket, a box of candy, and finally his keys. Several times I saw him eye his wife; in his enthusiasm he would have thrown her in, too, I fully believe, if she had not weighed a couple of hundred pounds. In a short time the

ring was carpeted with such missiles so that it would have supplied a pawnshop. Eventually all the objects are returned to their owners. Even the enthusiasm of a bullfight has to be kept within bounds.

'The ear, the tail, and around the ring!' the crowd was shouting.

That is the highest indication of approval that can be conferred on a display of skill. The bull's ear and tail are cut off and given to the *torero*, while little mules with bells drag the dead animal around the ring amid a deafening uproar.

After this tremendous outburst, with the galvanized audience seemingly part and parcel of the fighter's very body, a third bull entered the ring. Suddenly it was as if something had snapped inside the man, as if he had given all he could and had nothing left. He fumbled. The first few passes took the audience completely by surprise. There was a crushing silence, then here and there a murmur of displeasure like a summer shower, followed by shouts, and finally an infuriated roar. The same *torero* who had been raised to the heavens just before heard himself called every kind of name.

'What a disgrace! How that thing could fight!' cried Father, even denying the *torero* his manhood.

While the poor man's face was bathed with tears of shame and anger, for bullfighters are highly emotional, someone in the audience who knew his history repeated the words of the mother of Boabdil, the petty Moorish king who lost Granada:

'Weep like a woman for what you could not defend like a man!'

Amid cries of 'coward' and 'bluffer' from the excited crowd, I heard the gentle little voice of Altagracia, the very distinguished and undemonstrative Altagracia, saying:

'That man must have thought a bull is a rag-stuffed pin-cushion, pushing it around so much for nothing!'

What I said had better be left unrecorded.

Hallacas Without Vitamins

IS IT TRUE that you eat crocodiles and tigers down in Venezuela?

The question was put to me by a woman whose knowledge of the tropics rested on the fumbles of Hollywood.

'Yes, ma'am,' I told her. 'We eat them fried, and they are delicious.'

Although our fare actually includes nothing so exotic as fried tiger or crocodile fricassee, we do have some national dishes. Among them the place of honor goes to the *hallacas*, the tamales of Venezuela. We do not eat them all the year, but only on certain well-established occasions like saints' days, christenings, and the holidays from Christmas until New Year's.

When the twenty-fourth of December comes, there is not a table, rich or poor, that does not display its finest cloth with a platter of *hallacas*. Turkey and *hallacas* are the traditional specialties of the season.

No one knows today whether *hallacas* are of Spanish origin or indigenous. Personally I do not care. Legitimate or bastard, they are delicious.

Like windows, hair, or any other typical feature of our life, *hallacas* are not merely tangible objects, but ideas and sentiments. All Venezuelan women, with very few exceptions, think their own *hallacas* the finest in the country, and they are not alone in this impression. There is always a loving son,



grandson, or nephew who, confronted by a plate of *hallacas* that do not bear the family stamp, will sigh:

'Ah, but you should taste the *hallacas* we used to have at home.' Or, 'The best *hallacas* I ever tasted were the ones Grandmother made.' Or, again, 'I don't know what Aunt Adela puts in them, but nobody's *hallacas* are like hers.'

'I don't know what she puts in them' describes the situation perfectly. Every Venezuelan family has its own way of making them. This *je ne sais quoi* is a secret handed down from generation to generation.

The preparation of this vaunted dish is slow, requiring perhaps a week and the help of several people. Once made, the *hallacas* will keep for three weeks perfectly. They represent a lot of activity and effort, hands sticky with dough, lost tempers, hopes, doubts, and worries. One man realistically and graphically described the process, which amounts to a household revolution:

'They're giving birth out in the kitchen.'

Hallacas do make their appearance in the world like children, after all, with much trotting about, hot water, swaddling clothes, and many glances at the clock.

Speaking of their sentimental aspect, I am reminded of a memory of my childhood. It was dinnertime; we were all at home, and it was getting on to Christmas. Mother announced that the X's had asked us to eat Christmas *hallacas* with them. Father, with his usual absent-mindedness, instead of heeding the invitation that Mother was passing on to him, asked if she would like to go to the movies that evening after dinner. My brother Héctor, who could not have been more than fifteen, suddenly exclaimed with feeling:

'All my friends talk of their mamas' *hallacas* — everyone but me.'

It was true. In previous Christmas seasons Mother had been so busy that she had made no *hallacas* herself, but bought some from a needy family. She did not take up Héctor's remark, but I saw a sparkle in her eyes. Never afterward, in

spite of all my mother had to do, did we fail to eat 'Mama's *ballacas*.'

To be exact, it cannot be said that Mother's are the best in Venezuela, but they are delicious just the same — so good that when Mother, perhaps to make up for the three seasons when she had not made any, served them twice daily for a week, no one complained.

Making *ballacas* begins with husking corn. Ours is a people reared on corn, not wheat. Husking and shelling are the work of mestizos and mulattoes. The cook boils the prepared corn two hours and then lets it stand in the same water for twenty-four hours more. It is then put through a grinder, and finally, under the cook's strong hands, transformed into a white, well-kneaded dough. We do not like it white, however, but prefer an Indian hue; so annatto oil is added to dye it red. The dough is then spread on fresh banana leaves. There is always a difficulty at this stage; either there is too much dough for the leaves or too few leaves for all the dough. In our house the trouble is generally too much dough.

'Run out to the yard,' says Mother, 'and get me ten or twelve banana leaves.'

In northern countries those words must sound like a mid-summer night's dream.

The leaves are washed, trimmed, dried, and spread with dough. This last step calls for great skill, since the thickness of the dough must not vary a fraction of an inch throughout. Then it is time for a still bigger chore, the filling. Chicken, pork, veal, ham, bacon, olives, capers, raisins, almonds, spices, and a little wine are magically combined, and the filling is laid in the center of each leaf spread with dough. The *ballaca* is folded over with the same care with which one folds a first love-letter. Bound with string, it goes into a huge kettle of boiling water. What emerges from the pot after two hours of constant boiling is something truly wonderful.

Venezuelans who have the splendid courage to make *ballacas* in North America use oiled paper instead of banana leaves.

Substitutes sometimes have to be accepted. The ingredients, including shelled corn, can be found in any South American or Spanish grocery. The *je ne sais quoi*, of course, depends upon the cook and cannot be bought or standardized. Now that I have divulged the secret, if anyone feels capable of making *hallacas* and wishes to have an experienced Venezuelan sample them, I accept the invitation in advance.

I forgot to add that besides *je ne sais quoi*, there is another mystic requisite in making *hallacas*. The one who puts the corn to boil must also knead it. Otherwise, in the cooks' belief, the corn will resent its treatment and turn rancid.

Vatel, the great French cook who killed himself because his mayonnaise curdled, maintained that the kitchen is a magic cave and laboratory. That must be so, for every cook in Venezuela prepares rice in her own special way, frying it or not frying it, cooking it in quantities of water, in just a little water, or in none at all. Rice is our national dish *par excellence*. It is found twice daily on every table, rich or poor. We would rather do without bread than without rice. On days when elegant guests have been invited, instead of eating rice in its humble native form, white and plain, that is to say, we dress it up. We tint it green, yellow, red, brown, or black and add bits of beef, ham, sausage, fish, and almonds.

Coffee is another laboratory problem. Every housekeeper has her own method of preparing it. It is made early in the day and in great quantity, since men and women vie in drinking it. On the plains they take it black as ink and unsweetened, because 'coffee should be bitter, woman sweet, and cattle wild.'

Our Venezuelan coffee is the finest in the world. That is the claim of connoisseurs, no mere invention of my own. It is also the most expensive in the export market and for that reason little known abroad. Before the war it was sold to France and Germany. I suspect that today in those countries coffee is a memory as vague and distant as the sinking of Atlantis.

Arepas, on the other hand, our national bread, are simple

affairs. Like happy peoples, they have no history. Round as the world, they do, however, have a beginning and an end. They begin in a grinder and end upon a griddle, full of cheese and butter and sometimes even ham. In this form, known as *tostadas*, they can be bought from pushcarts on certain well-known corners in the old part of Caracas. Rich people eat *arepas* with their breakfast and wheat bread at other times; the poor eat *arepas* or cassava bread at all meals. When someone says, 'It's one of those houses where they only eat *arepas*,' one knows the financial situation leaves something to be desired.

A presumptuous servant will air her social standing or her aspirations with the words, 'I'm one who eats white bread and wears a hat,' and then feel entitled to figure in the *Social Register* or *Who's Who*.

Hervido is the Sunday dish, a thick, substantial beef or chicken stew with a great variety of boiled vegetables and greens. We have vegetables of every hue and flavor that are unknown in northern climes, as well as many that are common in other countries. We have enough different vegetables and fruits to make a vegetarian's paradise. There are so many kinds of fruit that even the average Venezuelan does not know them all. That is why the national coat of arms displays two horns of plenty. Of bananas alone there are twenty-four varieties, ranging from the enormous plantain, which is only eaten cooked, to the tiny dwarfs and pink *topochos*. There are fourteen kinds of mangoes and numerous types of oranges, figs, cherries, alligator pears, melons, custard apples, passion fruit, cherimoyas, medlars, pomegranates, and prickly pears. Each of these names connotes a harmony of fragrance, taste, and color.

We have every tropical fruit and all the fruits of the temperate zone as well, some of the latter imported, to be sure. For the equivalent of seven cents we can buy a hand of bananas spotted like a tiger skin. Mangoes sell for fourteen cents a

hundred in summer when the crop comes in; they may even be so plentiful that no one will pay such a fancy price.

And yet — oh, mysteries of the human heart! — with all our cheap and luscious tropical fruits, many respectable families will pay twenty-five and even fifty cents for an apple or a pear brought by plane from some northern orchard. We have not yet learned to appreciate what we have at home; like faithless husbands, we bow to something from abroad without realizing that we already have as good or better.

Perhaps only a mature culture values the simple, common things aright. The prestige of the foreign and exotic is especially baneful in literature. At the end of the last century and the beginning of the present, when South American letters were beginning to shake off the old Spanish domination, the fashionable themes were still nobility, China, the Orient. Our mestizo poets reveled in lyrics of fair-haired princesses, countesses, and abbots, geisha girls, mandarins, and golden dragons. Their inspiration came from far away. Fortunately, the present generation of Venezuelan writers is finding its subjects in its own land.

In the line of drinks you can have in Venezuela all the internationally known ones and heaven besides. That is, a rather large selection of exquisite beverages. Our beer, for instance, is one of our seven wonders. At least, that is the opinion I formed when I visited in Maracaibo, our largest brewing town. When Hannibal Fourth, a local boy of Maracaibo, asked Altagracia and me what we had liked most in his town, my cousin, whose life is one long dream of domesticity and tablecloths, replied:

'I like the suns.'

Maracaibo is famous for exquisite needlework and a certain type of lace. The latter, from its sheer beauty, is called sun, and the characteristic pattern in white threads warrants the name.

Hannibal Fourth, accustomed to romantic women, obvi-

ously expected me to confess my fondness for the lake at twilight with white gulls on the water — white, that is, until the oil stains their feathers black. And a beautiful sight they often are. I must have made the worst kind of impression, for I said boldly:

‘I liked the beer.’

And I meant it.

Lest you wonder at the name Hannibal Fourth, let me assure you that this is nothing, for another of Maracaibo’s specialties, besides the beer and the ‘suns,’ is a penchant for the strangest names in the world.

The proverb says that the rabbit jumps where you least expect to find him. In Maracaibo least of all would one look for an Agamemnon, a Praxiteles, a Heraclitus, but they are there. I suspect that early census-takers and priests must have been passionate devotees of history, ransacking encyclopedias for famous and high-sounding names to bestow on the new-born.

The boy who carried our bags when we arrived was modestly named Numa Pompilius. The bootblack was merely Julius Caesar. The barber was Vercingetorix; the hotel porter, Lycurgus. Somewhere, too, it seems to me, we came across a Pericles in *alpargatas* and a Homer who collected empty bottles. However, I am not certain of the latter. He might have been Plato or Aristotle.

Some of the mothers of Maracaibo do not bother to consult the classics each time they bear a son. It is much easier to use one name for all, with numbers to indicate the sequence. Hence, Socrates First, Socrates Second, Socrates Third, Socrates Fourth Chacón. Why should only kings and occasional self-styled aristocrats of North America bear numbers as well as names?

Due to the snob value of imported styles, the poor tourists who come to Venezuela eager to live in the native manner, eat native dishes, and submerge themselves in our true environment are badly cheated. Some friends of mine from New York went to Venezuela and stayed at the Country Club near

Caracas, a very fashionable institution. In three whole months they had had no opportunity to speak Spanish or to eat a single Venezuelan meal. Everyone spoke French or English, and since the club was exclusive, it was held to be beneath its dignity to include native dishes in the menu. When I gave my friends a mango from our garden, they were both delighted and astonished. Needless to say, to avoid a revolution, I carried the fruit well wrapped, lest respectable Caraqueños should recognize it for the humble thing it was.

Every day Venezuelans eat delicious native vegetables, corn dishes, cheese, and fruit; but when a visitor is expected, particularly if he is a foreigner, all that disappears from the table. Instead there are foreign dishes, mostly French. If the guest is superelegant, if the lady of the house is tired, or if there is no time for kitchen alchemy — well, then he will be fed canned goods, yes, sir, out of tins from North America or Europe. There will be shrimp, squid, caviar, corned beef, ham, oysters, *pâté de foie gras*, sausages. Every foresighted housekeeper has her arsenal of cans tucked away in cupboards against unexpected visits. Whenever anyone stays unexpectedly to a meal, you can bet ten to one that he will be fed corned beef and *petits pois*. *Petits pois* are the paramount favorite.

On one occasion when I had been asked to lunch at the house of a relative who sets a splendid Venezuelan table, I invited a boy from the American Legation in Caracas to come along. He had been complaining of the few opportunities he had to try our native cooking, and I assured him that if he appeared with me unexpectedly, there would be no time for any foreign dishes to be prepared in his honor.

After a truly delicious meal, with rice, black beans, meat pies, fried meat, and caramel, my delighted friend departed. My relative, however, privately and with a suggestion of reproach, said feelingly:

'You and your surprises! What will that man think! There wasn't even time to put some *petits pois* in the rice!'

At home we have a garden with sixteen different kinds of fruit trees. The branches of one of them, a breadfruit, shade a terrace where the whole family breakfasts and lunches on days when there is no threat of rain. These meals in the open air, looking out upon the garden under a tropical blue sky, are veritably enchanting. We once had a guest who insisted on eating out-of-doors in spite of Mother's remark that since the breadfruit was ripe, it would be wiser to stay in the dining-room.

'You eat out here every day,' he said, 'and none of the fruit has ever fallen on your heads, has it?'

'But we know how to dodge them,' Héctor explained.

The meal progressed smoothly until, at the very moment when our guest was telling us that our fears were quite unfounded and the maid had finished placing the plates for the meat — wham! An enormous breadfruit passed a hair's breadth from his head and burst upon his plate with the force of a bomb. The average breadfruit weighs from two to four pounds.

We eat vegetables and fruit because we like them, not for their vitamins. Our diet is not planned and technical, but intuitive and fanciful. Our calories come primarily from the sweets and sugar which we eat in quantity. Farinaceous foods are the basis of our fare. We eat few eggs and drink little milk, but consume an abundance of protein in the form of meat.

The wealthy classes eat too much, two heavy meals a day, each with three or four courses, one of which is meat, but the poor are badly fed. There are many rachitic, undernourished children and many adults who do not have a balanced diet. But this state of things unfortunately exists not alone in Venezuela.

The North American passion for raw vegetables is very little emulated. I have heard more than one Venezuelan husband say to his wife:

'Look here, woman, what do you think I am, a rabbit?

Take that jungle off my plate and give me something more solid and less pictorial.'

Ruth W., one of my North American friends, is a conscientious traveler, and when an opportunity came for a trip to Venezuela, she asked me to tell her all about it — food, clothes, flowers, music, transportation, what not. Of course I gave her many pointers.

'Above all,' I urged, 'don't come back without buying some pins set with iridescent insects, without visiting Bolívar's house, or without trying *pabellón*, as we call our native dish of black beans, fried meat, and rice.'

Insect pins she didn't find, but she did buy some of *cochano* or unburnished gold, very cheap and pretty. Bolívar's house proved easy enough to visit, since the government has special guides to show it to tourists even on days when it is closed. As for the *pabellón* or 'national flag,' so called from the three colors of its ingredients, she ate it indeed — but in what a setting!

In that strange anglicized Spanish or hispanicized English which North Americans speak after two years of studying our language in high school, she told the chauffeur who was driving her from the harbor to Caracas:

'*Mí querer comer pabellón*' — 'Me want eat *pabellón*.'

The surprised chauffeur blinked his eyes and asked her to repeat. This time she produced a piece of paper and wrote *pabellón* on it. At this point it should be stated that the word is used in non-culinary senses by muleteers, the lower depths, and students. Ruth bore no resemblance to a student, much less to a muleteer or to the lower depths. 'You never can tell about these foreigners,' the chauffeur must have thought. Although a Venezuelan woman of any standing might eat *pabellón* fourteen times a week, because of a certain meaning attached to it in rough conversation among males, she would hardly use the word in public, unless perhaps she is a young student.

After thirty-five swift kilometers along hair-raising preci-

pices, they reached Caracas. They went dashing into the city, turned countless corners, and went on again, until finally the chauffeur explained to Ruth that the fashionable place where people went for native dishes was under repair and closed. What was he to do?

'Mí comer pabellón, PABELLÓN!' Ruth stubbornly insisted.

'I don't know any other place where respectable people go,' the chauffeur explained, more and more astonished.

In his anxiety he pushed back his hat, scratched his head, and stopped the car. But Ruth persisted in spelling out the word and ordering him to carry on. At last he had a bright idea.

'You wouldn't mind,' he asked, 'if I took you to a place where I go at times? The food is good, but the people — well, God help you! Do you understand? There's no other place I know where you can get that dish at this hour. I'll take you there if you really want to go. It is called Freedom of Action. What do you say?'

Among so many words and idioms rapidly delivered, freedom of action was all Ruth understood. It seemed a stimulating and democratic phrase to her.

'Freedom of action!' she cried. 'Let's go!'

The chauffeur put on his hat and made a helpless gesture with his arms to release himself from all responsibility.

They reached a section which seemed quaint and very picturesque to Ruth. Freedom of Action was in its very center. Inside was a large table covered with a checkered cloth, a counter covered with bottles of liquor, and some chairs. Several doors opened on the street; a radio was blaring; on the walls were some pictures of the Sahara.

A woman with abundant flesh, but scanty clothes, finally brought the longed-for *pabellón*. In spite of all she'd been through, Ruth thought it delicious. One thing, however, did strike her as strange. Throughout the meal men stopped to stare as they passed by the open doors. Some made remarks, some smiled, but mostly they just gazed.

'Heavens!' thought Ruth. 'They can't have many tourists in this city if my presence attracts so much attention.'

It was not until the following day, when she related the episode to some Venezuelan friends, that she learned the truth.

Back in New York, when I asked her what she thought of native Venezuelan cooking, she told me with her North American sense of humor:

'I found it very good. Especially the *pabellón*. I ate that in the red-light district of Caracas.'

To Love, Honor, and Obey

DO YOU PROMISE to love, honor, and obey?' asked the priest, and Altagracia took her vows.

My cousin was pledging herself to be an obedient and loving wife to Ramiro Casona so long as they both should live. Before her was opening a way that might be tortuous or straight, strewn with flowers or prickly with thorns. She was setting out on it full of faith and ardor, like immemorial women before her.

My daughters and Altagracia's will hardly enter on marriage or any other undertaking of adult life with quite the same dazzling look of dedication. The world changes, even in Venezuela, even in the carefree, laughing Venezuela of the Briceño family and others of our sort. There are many Venezuelas. We hope, we believe, that such a one as that of the dictator Gómez is gone forever. But what is coming next?

The war is affecting my country as well as yours, though the only changes I can report with certainty do not seem especially profound. Our *petits pois* are coming oftener in cans from Argentina than from the United States. Bobby pins are still plentiful, as I learned to my sorrow the last time I went home, when I stuffed a small bag with hairpins and was hooted at for my trouble. We have plenty of gas of good quality. Tires, however, are becoming a bit of a problem. In consequence, though a short time ago no respectable woman would have ridden in a stranger's car, it is done often now as a sort of

public duty, and no one thinks anything of it — except that it may lead to some unexpectedly interesting experiences.

Beginning with Altagracia's marriage, we had a regular spate of weddings. Héctor, my brother, closed the books on his bachelorhood. His wife, Berta, a beautiful blonde, fitted at once into the easy rhythm of our family. Héctor and Berta make their home with my parents; so do Altagracia and Ramiro. It was all arranged simply enough by adding a couple of garages to our place.

Our little Estefanía, too, found happiness. At twenty, she was married to a widower twice her age who already had four children. For Estefanía life had begun with sacrifice, and so it must continue, I reflected as the ceremony proceeded. Just then, from under her wedding veil, Estefanía smiled. I had never seen her smile before. What makes other people happy is often a major mystery.

More is happening in Venezuela than marriages and different labels on our merchandise. New winds seem to be stirring in the most secluded patios. With the war, activity in the petroleum industry has risen to a frenzied pitch. Years ago oil made it possible for Gómez to live like an Oriental potentate and to hand out fortunes to his henchmen; it also gave him the means of tying Caracas closer to the high mountain country in the west with a fine road. But oil is not enough, any more than the great ranches on the plains are enough with the boundless freedom and thin living they provide for our cowboys or *llaneros*, or the steep wheat fields of the western Andes, which have never produced sufficient for the country's needs.

Sir Walter Raleigh looked for El Dorado in the Guianas near the southern end of Venezuela. In the Guiana highlands of our south in recent years hard-headed scientific men have found what they think may be a new El Dorado. I do not mean gold and diamond mines, though there are those, too. The new wealth is a great stretch of splendid agricultural land, neither too dry nor too wet, too hot nor too cold. It

is still empty except for a scattering of primitive Indians like those who haunted the Green Mansions of W. H. Hudson. It was in or near this region that Hudson laid his lovely tenuous story. Venezuela needs more people, and all over the world there are people who need a new homeland. The Guiana highlands may be the answer to many questions.

Speculations like these and the statistical enthusiasms of my generation would have made my grandmothers yawn. But they may matter almost as much to my children as bouquets and blushes.

Venezuela, my Venezuela, is a land of youth and laughter. We shall not cease to laugh if we learn also to see all around us a little more clearly and a little more deeply. If we should succeed, for instance, in closing the circuit between rich material resources that have so far benefited none but the wealthy and the noble visions of a Bolívar that have so far eluded the grasp of all classes alike, we would have something real to laugh about.

Now let me tell you the latest. I have just heard that Altagracia is expecting. Héctor and Berta, who are always behindhand, will surely start their own family before long. New nurseries as well as new garages will have to be added to the big, sprawling house. I shouldn't be surprised to hear that Estefanía had come back, husband, stepchildren, and all. The frame of our household is elastic, and it can expand comfortably to accommodate a larger picture.

Here in alien New York, where life is arranged vertically instead of horizontally, and inches of space are too precious for a home to inclose birds, deer, rabbits, and fruit trees, let alone many children, I go about my studying and writing and between whiles teach my children a bit of English and two-and-two-makes-four. I tell myself that they and Altagracia's, Héctor's, and perhaps Estefanía's little ones will grow up in a more sensible world than the one we knew. The thought comes off the top of my mind, however. What fills my heart is sheer longing for the old known things, for home, the sunny

patios, the idle happy voices, Presentación singing over the suds, my mother's blessing, my father's '*un tiempito*.' How long the little while always seems before I return again!

No need for me to take an oath of faithfulness to my Venezuela. I have no choice but to love, honor, and obey.

THE END

